

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CARNIVAL TEMPESTS AND STRANGE SHOWERS  
INDEED: THE POLITICS OF SPATIAL PRAXIS IN THE  
DE LA GUARDA FLYING MACHINE

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*Período Villa Villa*, the genre-bending, multi-layered spectacle-aerobic-festival-dance-music-circus-rave-ceremony-environmental theatre hybrid created by the Argentinean performance troupe De La Guarda, made its off-Broadway debut on Tuesday, 9 June 1998. Flying through the stratosphere attached to ropes and harnesses, falling from the sky in order to engage the spectatorial body in effusive e/motional explosions, bringing a modicum of the streets indoors to generate another world, the company resists, subverts or even transcends passive codes of audience behavior and reception ensconced in conventional theatre spaces. In doing so, *Villa Villa* potentially transforms the sense of *place* engendered by the architectonics of discipline and the semiotics of corporatism which dominate its theatrical and cultural milieu. Combining participant-observation, semio-phenomenological analysis and a polyphony of interdisciplinary perspectives, this thesis investigates the possibility of a radical, carnivalesque spatial praxis in the center of the late capitalist theatre estate. Perhaps, as I argue, this is a different marketplace altogether.

CARNIVAL TEMPESTS AND STRANGE SHOWERS INDEED:  
THE POLITICS OF SPATIAL PRAXIS IN THE  
DE LA GUARDA FLYING MACHINE

by

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For Jennifer Parker, in memoriam.

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## **Carnival Tempests and Strange Showers Indeed: The Politics of Spatial Praxis in the De La Guarda Flying Machine**

*Suppose someone has flown often in his dreams and finally, as soon as he dreams, he is conscious of his power and art of flight as if it were his privilege, also his characteristic and enviable happiness. He believes himself capable of every kind of arc simply with the lightest impulse; he knows the feeling of a certain divine frivolity, an “upward” without tension and constraint, a “downward” without condescension and humiliation—without gravity! How could a human being who had had such dream experiences and dream habits fail to find that the word “happiness” had a different color and definition in his waking life too? How could he fail to desire happiness differently? “Rising” as described by poets must seem to him, compared with this “flying,” too earthbound, muscle-bound, forced, too “grave.”<sup>1</sup>*

Friedrich Nietzsche

*Everything started with the uncontrollable desire to explode, to expand, to choose a space and take complete hold of it, while leaving nothing out of the game. The tide produced by the audience is a fundamental part of the emotional upheaval of this show, where everything is fragile, everything is changeable except our tempests. The victim is reality. There are no laws of nature in what’s fantastic; there is neither logic nor stability.<sup>2</sup>*

De La Guarda

### **Notes from the Center of the Vortex**

Thursday, 20 February 2003. Daryl Roth Theatre. New York City. I am standing on the inner rim of a mass of spectators who have formed a circle around a large, open void in the center of the performance space. A raucous carnival energy consumes this old U. S. savings bank-turned-theatre: subwoofers pound out deafening tribal electronica as several impassioned performers move through the crowd, fervently chant-singing an unintelligible lyric as they dance and jump and scream with various members of the audience. Inside the unpopulated central area, a nearly naked performer (a climbing harness covers his genitals) runs about in a bacchic frenzy, yelling nonsensical gibberish through a delirious smile as he struggles against the tension of a rappelling

cable that connects him to the ceiling. One at a time, he snatches members of the audience from the crowded floor, strapping them to his glistening body and whisking them away thirty feet into the air. Three spectators—two young women and a slightly balding man—have already flown with this unclad, pre-linguistic mad hatter when he approaches me with wild eyes and a mischievous grin . . . I will soon become the fourth “victim.”

The next few moments occur in rapid succession: the actor-madman pulls me into the circle and wraps a small harness around my waist while another male performer tugs at my shoes, presumably to make sure they will remain intact during our flight. Both performers move with dexterous efficiency, as if they have executed this simple pre-flight ritual thousands of times. The click of a latch. A slap on the back. Thumbs up, good to go. With a nod to the climbers (who operate the complex system of ropes, cables and cords from the top level of a three-story scaffold) and a firm if soggy embrace, the impish aerialist hoists me into the stratosphere, my legs and feet dangling flaccidly as we commence launch.

Rising above the heads of my fellow audience members, I sense hundreds of eyes penetrating my flesh, sizing me up, judging, consuming my body with their collective gaze: in a matter of seconds, I have been transported from the sea of faces to the center of the spectacle.<sup>3</sup> Instantaneously, the flying apparatus begins to pick up speed; my escort wraps his legs around my body, gyrates, laughs. The room spins rapidly, objects and faces and architectures meld into a perceptual blur, a turbulent sphere of colors and shapes intermixing, destabilizing the spatial topographies of the theatre. Up and down, east and west—all coordinates, for that matter—become relative.



Absolute disorientation. The center of a vortex. The core of a centrifuge. I can no longer hear the music blasting from the speakers, no longer see the ground below—these external stimuli simply dissolve into the blur as my wonderfully dislocated field of perception hones in on its immediate surroundings even as it projects forth from the eye of this aerial tempest. While chaos swirls furiously on all sides, here, inside the flying machine, I can almost hear my companion’s breath, taste his sweat, smell his phatic vocalizations. A synaesthetics of flight. It is as if my body-mind could become pure sensation, feeling, pure velocity, momentum. I remember emitting a series of nonsensical utterances not unlike those of my partner in flight—a certain emotional outpouring born of a mental space without language. Strapped to the naked body of *un ángel de la guarda*, soaring through the heavens of a bank-turned-theatre, everyday reality falls away in the ecstasy of the occasion, as if a liquid border suddenly opened between dream and performance—an emotional intensity I have never experienced in a theatre before or since. To paraphrase Nietzsche: “How could a human being who had had such performance experiences fail to desire happiness differently?”

\* \* \* \* \*

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton claims, “Nobody is in doubt about what it is that all men and women want, only about what it means. What everyone wants is happiness . . . .”<sup>4</sup> *Período Villa Villa*, the genre-bending, multi-layered spectacle-aerobic-festival-dance-music-circus-rave-ceremony-environmental theatre hybrid created by the Argentinean performance troupe De La Guarda is, so the company claims, a means by which to find it: “De La Guarda is a stroke of luck. A run towards happiness.”<sup>5</sup> Fundamentally, *Villa Villa* is about the erosion of borders: between actor

and audience, actuality and possibility, dream and performance. There are no seats, partitions or demarcations, no fixed staging area, no proscenium to frame the illusion. This is space-in-transit, shifting, transforming, an open space without center which extends outward, over and through the entire audience. As the performance evolves, actors fly above the throng of spectatorial bodies, crewmembers direct mobile platforms through the crowd, water cascades from sprinklers mounted in the ceiling, debris litters the soggy floor—the spectacle surrounds us on all sides, dislocating our mundane perception of space.

We try to invest a place completely . . . . There can be no cold zone. The whole space is invaded and the audience is immersed in the show in the same way that the actors are. The emotional tide produced by the audience modifies the show's temperature.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this is not a safe or pleasant space (although for many it holds the potential to produce great pleasure). Here, one cannot be invisible, cannot be a voyeur. We cannot merely look at and listen to the spectacle, for this spatial ecosystem expands the visual-aural complex of conventional theatre reception to include all of the senses, allowing (forcing?) audience members to see/hear/smell/touch/sometimes taste the performance. Co-director and creator Pichon Baldinu reiterates the point in a 1998 interview: “It is a psychological and sensual experience for the audience . . . . The audience and the actors are sharing the same space where we build an atmosphere that is changing all the time.”<sup>7</sup> The environment undergoes a series of spectacular transmutations which modify the physical landscape, producing an ambivalent confrontation with the spectator, who must ultimately *decide* whether her physical and emotional life will become entwined with the performance.

The critical inversion I experienced on that February night—shifting from the

role of observer to that of the observed—destabilized my position as the so-called “objective” researcher, disturbing my ability to peer at the spectacle from the outside. My experience of the event was unique, colored by observations made thirty feet in the air, attached to the semi-naked body of a very sweaty man. From such a position, how can one maintain her or his sense of detachment, distance, transparency? How can s/he simply blend in with the crowd? The answer: s/he can’t . . . and this is the defining characteristic of De La Guarda’s spatial praxis.<sup>8</sup> As the subsequent pages demonstrate, the performance countermines critical distance (though not criticism altogether), inverts the voyeuristic gaze, saturates the senses and throws the actor-audience dichotomy into flux. Via the integration of environmental and spectacular space, the company makes it virtually impossible to have anything other than a fragmented, subjective experience—here, one can rarely see the whole and can never claim the perceptual space of another. And yet, the idea of community pervades: bodies are perpetually in contact, spectators become actors become spectators, several of their “own” rise in flight. Consequently, *Villa Villa* fosters a creative and dialogical relationship between spectator and performance that encourages, even necessitates, individual interpretation, variable perspective, spontaneous interaction and interpersonal exchange.

Although the performance often defies interpretation and renders objectivity virtually impossible, I attempt to walk the line between distance and immersion, critical consciousness and participatory engagement—stepping inside the flying machine to observe the interactions between human beings and the performance environment, stepping outside to examine how the flying machine might introduce a radical spatial praxis into a cultural discourse where public space is often overrun by mechanisms of

discipline and dispossession. Thus, methodologically speaking, I combine participant-observation, semio-phenomenological analysis and a polyphony of interdisciplinary perspectives in order to frame, document and interpret this highly mutable, heteroglot environment. To begin, I “thickly describe” tiny vistas of unique audience and actorly behavior in an effort to foreground the human element, to let the performance speak for itself.<sup>9</sup> These behavioral and performative signs comprise a large portion of the “data” I collected for this piece. However, even as I immerse the reader in performative description, I also recognize the omnipresence of the critical frame, for “in writing about performance we are always automatically subjecting it to theory.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, integrating Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of carnival, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s rhizome, Jose Esteban Muñoz’s theory of worldmaking, Clifford Geertz’s notion of deep play and Edward S. Casey’s philosophy of place, among others, I perform a kind of double interpretive operation, simultaneously examining the performance as theatre space and as social space, utilizing this prismatic critical lens to bring theories of culture into the theatre space and to elucidate how De La Guarda functions *in situ*. I do not want to limit this document to a single theory; quite the contrary, I hope to bring several theories into play concurrently, to allow multiple voices to swirl together in a single space. Not unlike *Villa Villa*, I seek polyphony, multivocality, heteroglossia. Though I have not conducted interviews, at times I include the voices of original company members as they perform themselves through the media. In doing so, I do not claim to know the “real” intentions or experiences of the creators or performers; rather, I take these mediatized self-references to be *performances* of intentionality and experience, a rhetorical strategy which at times illuminates and at

others contradicts what my own performance of interpretation offers in the following pages. Finally, because positionality is so important in *Villa Vilh*, I have endeavored to locate myself throughout, providing a critical-experiential account of three performances I witnessed in New York City on February 20-22, 2003. Some of these descriptions consolidate portions of the event that remained more or less unchanged; however, because each night was fraught with unstructured and unplanned occurrences, specific instances have been aligned with specific moments.

### **Launching the De La Guarda Flying Machine**

*Período Villa Villa* made its off-Broadway debut at the Daryl Roth Theatre in Union Square on Tuesday, 9 June 1998. Five years earlier, the performance was merely an experimental zygote, a nightly series of open, formless, unfunded improvisations staged before rock concerts at Prix D'Ami, a popular Buenos Aires music club.<sup>11</sup> Five years later, the performance has become an international phenomenon, with installations running simultaneously in Buenos Aires, New York, Las Vegas, Mexico, D. F. and Seoul along with extended tours in Europe and East Asia.<sup>12</sup> The ten-year span between the Prix D'Ami and the Rio Casino Resort Hotel (in Vegas, where the company resides in a multi-million dollar space built specifically for this production) has seen De La Guarda rise from poverty to prosperity, from local performance experiment to global theatre institution, from the Southern periphery to the Northern mainstream and beyond.

Although I necessarily limit my scope to the New York installation, it is important to recognize the fact that *Villa Villa* contains another story entirely.<sup>13</sup> Pichon

Baldinu, Diqui James, Gaby Kerpel, Tomas D'Aquila and Tomas James formed De La Guarda in 1993, a decade removed from Argentina's *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (National Reorganization Process)—more infamously known as the “Dirty War”—a period of violent military dictatorship during which an estimated thirty-thousand citizens were abducted from their homes, beaten in the streets in broad daylight, subjected to inhumane torture and, as Diana Taylor puts it, “permanently ‘disappeared.’”<sup>14</sup> From 1976-83, a politics of fear dominated the Argentinean social landscape as the military systematically “cleansed” the nation of dissident voices even as it denied such happenings. Reality thus became phantasm, “truth” a dissimulation constructed by the regime. Seeing and telling was dangerous, sometimes fatal. For those in the arts: a reduction of possibilities; creativity and imagination relegated to hidden spaces; protests silenced. According to Taylor, “Transgression became the property of the state.”<sup>15</sup> Though it opened more than ten years after the fact, De La Guarda nevertheless represents a carnivalesque departure from the very real emotional-psychological residue of the military junta and its aftermath. Of course, the chasm between the body experience of the Argentinean population—people who lived through the Dirty War, who saw friends and family disappear before their eyes, who had their hands cut off by the military torture machine, saw perpetrators of the most heinous human rights violations go free by edict of their own democratic government—and (most) New York audience members is so vast as to render the original place of performance untranslatable. Thus, although the disciplinary systems of Argentina during the military regime and America in the twenty-first century are virtually incomparable, each context implements ideological apparatuses of power and

domination which *Villa Villa* works radically to resist, transform, transcend.<sup>16</sup> While an intercultural study of the performance as it traverses geographical, historical and sociocultural boundaries would prove both useful and fascinating, such an undertaking is beyond the purview of this analysis. So, recognizing the danger of not-telling, I launch my inquiry into the flying machine knowing that the voyage does not end with these pages.

The troupe's immense popularity across a range of cultural settings is due in large part to its ability to create such joy through an eclectic blend of performance strategies. A combination of aerobic virtuosity, tribal dance and rhythmic movement, audience participation, technical ingenuity, environmental/spatial manipulation and interpersonal play immerses the audience in a frenetic seventy-minute journey through a series of perpetually shifting atmospheres and images. Flying through the stratosphere attached to rappelling cables and bungee cords, the performers strive to generate a visceral encounter with the performance, to build an alternative world in which possibility becomes actuality and *vice versa*—a space where human beings can fly. Essentially, De La Guarda wants to circumnavigate the rational mind, foregoing traditional characterization and storyline, going instead for the unconscious, the senses and the body.

We don't want you to understand the characters . . . . We want you instead to feel the expression, and the energy.<sup>17</sup>

Echoing the techniques and traditions of various genres such as the Latin American *teatro alternativo*,<sup>18</sup> Argentinean folk culture, street and guerilla theatre, 1960s-70s experimental performance, happenings, circus and the various “-isms” (Symbol-, Dada-, Futur-, to name the most relevant) of the twentieth-century avant-garde, De La Guarda

produces a popular (in both senses) breed of performance which, often irreverently, turns mainstream theatrical norms and conventions on their collective heads.

As such, *Villa Villa* is part of a growing trend in the international theatre marketplace toward non-traditional, non-linear, non-verbal, highly physical spectacle-performance. Like Blue Man Group, Cirque du Soleil, Stomp and others who have capitalized on this recent spate of “performancism”—a term used by American artist-writer-performer Douglas Davis to describe the widespread, intercontinental proliferation of performance art at the cusp of the twenty-first century<sup>19</sup>—De La Guarda profits economically from its status as an alternative to standard theatre fare. Many describe the performance as “extreme theatre,”<sup>20</sup> positioning *Villa Villa* in the cultural marketplace alongside other massified products whose chief marketing strategy is their purported intensity, danger, risk, violence, or devil-may-care attitude: “X-treme” sports, rock concerts, television shows, video games, even energy drinks and snack foods claim to transport the consumer from quotidian reality to the proverbial edge, to the limits of his experience and beyond (the gendered pronoun is quite intentional).

Of course, this is nothing new to performance critics and scholars: Chris Burden, Karen Finley, Ron Athey, Stelarc and Orlan have, in various guises, been practicing “extreme” performance for the better part of three decades. Postmodern choreographer Trisha Brown used climbing gear to scale the walls of the Whitney Museum in her 1971 Equipment Piece, *Walking on the Wall*.<sup>21</sup> The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, The Open Theatre, Peter Brook’s cruelty experiments with the Royal Shakespeare Company and, more recently, the Catalan troupe La Fura dels Baus all bear witness to the kind of intense, post-Artaudian stagecraft for which De La Guarda has become



internationally renowned.<sup>22</sup> However, the aforementioned performers and performances tend to operate in the “creases” of mainstream social discourse,<sup>23</sup> circumventing the economic and ideological sprawl of the late capitalist culture-machine (the most notable exception being La Fura, who in 1992 led the opening ceremony of the Barcelona Olympic Games and have since participated in “promotional actions” for multinational conglomerates such as Pepsi, Mercedes Benz and Warner Bros., among others<sup>24</sup>). By remaining in the margins of the dominant culture, these performance artists and alternative theatre companies attempt to carve out mental and physical spaces where artistic concerns dominate economic ones, expressive freedom is paramount and reflexive critique becomes possible. While De La Guarda’s performance praxis is unique in its own right, its location in the field of cultural production,<sup>25</sup> more than its so-called X-treme stagecraft, deviates from performance art or avant-garde theatrical traditions. In other words, the commercial frame separates this performance from its crease-dwelling antecedents.

Taking (its) place, as it were, in the economic and geographic center of the theatre estate, *Villa Villa* not only treads the perilous ideological ground of the bottom line, but also inhabits a unique position from which to resist or even transcend the commodity culture that always already surrounds the performance.<sup>26</sup> As I will argue, such resistance and/or transcendence is fundamentally a matter of space. Conventional theatre auditoria force spectators to sit in the dark, separated from the performance, looking on passively, voyeuristically from a designated, fixed position.<sup>27</sup> Baz Kershaw convincingly asserts that the interpellative operations of late capitalist ideology are installed and reproduced in this kind of bifurcated spatial praxis.

[T]he processes of commodification in . . . Western performance in the theatre are created through the protocols of audience membership, which massage the consciousness of spectators into a tacitly willing collusion in their own dispossession.<sup>28</sup>

As global corporatism widens the gap between production and consumption, the commercial theatre functions increasingly as “a method of spatial indoctrination that aims to embed normative social values in the behaviour of its participants.”<sup>29</sup> The divisive mode of conventional spectatorship which segregates actor-product from spectator-consumer reinforces “theatre as a *disciplinary system*” and, consequently, the prevailing ideologies of the context from which it springs.<sup>30</sup> In the ensuing essay, I discuss how the carnivalization of the performance environment potentially disturbs those disciplinary mechanisms submerged in the commodification of mainstream theatrical performance. As we shall see, these carnival tempests and strange showers construct an alternative world, a world of play—which is not to say an innocent or puerile world—in an attempt to destroy and re-constitute reality according to a new (anti-)logic. A rehearsal for the possible. A performance-dream of flight.

However, this world is not insulated from the flow of sociocultural, political and economic reality. Quite the contrary, as Bert States tells us in his study of theatre phenomenology, this “world outside theatre” often becomes part of the performative mix; it “interrupts for a while the vision of [a performance’s] mental mirror-image world.”<sup>31</sup> As I will demonstrate, in *Villa Villa* the phenomenal actuality of the spectacle is omnipresent, indeed foregrounded, producing a “rhizomatic”<sup>32</sup> world in which environmental staging and spectacular representation combine to produce a space that is neither completely signifying nor absolutely present. Rather, the liminal-liminoid world that De La Guarda makes (in conjunction with its participants) has the potential

to create a radical breach in the real. In doing so, the performance might induce a confrontation with the spectator that happens neither in real-time nor in fictive time, but in “a now-time of insight and transformation” which, in the words of Elin Diamond, leads ultimately to “a subtle refunctioning of experience.”<sup>33</sup>

The final section moves from the treatment of space inside the theatre to investigate how this carnivalesque, rhizomatic world might transform the sense of *place* generated in and through *Villa Villa*'s social, economic and architectural context. In a world of deteriorating borders and condensed spaces where cultures overlap and collide, hyphenated identities propagate at a rapid clip and technology transports us across the map in a matter of seconds, the notion of place has become a major trope in our workaday lives. As human subjects and raw materials and transnational commodities and cultural iconographies and global spectacles and televised wars and advanced technologies and conflicting ideologies “pile up without destroying one another,”<sup>34</sup> one's placement in relation to the rest of the world is a (if not *the*) defining characteristic of our age. In the realm of global performance, Una Chaudhuri describes the emergence of “a growing discourse . . . elaborated around such terms as *borders*, *limits*, *rootlessness*, *territoriality*, *nomadism*, *habitus*, *home*, *homelessness*, and *exile*.”<sup>35</sup> Predating Chaudhuri, Marvin Carlson observes that performances inside and outside the theatre are highly conditioned by the semiotics of location: “places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatre experience.”<sup>36</sup> In a sense, all performances are *in situ*. Politics, economics, histories, performance traditions, cultural customs, identities and mythologies converge in the place of performance, creating a multilayered, polyvocal

site in which diverse social practices, collective imaginings, discursive paradigms and individual interpretations intersect *in the immediacy of the performative present*.

Because *Villa Villa* is located at the center of the theatre estate, the surrounding ideological operations of state power (which manifest in the theatre building and the grid structure of the urban cityscape) and commercialization (the proliferation of multinational conglomerates in Union Square) combine with the disciplinary mechanisms embedded in conventional theatre and *Villa Villa*'s carnivalesque spatial praxis to generate the sense of place. This is De La Guarda's paradox: situated in a place where the signs of commodification converge with the disciplinary systems at work in the striated auditoria of Broadway and off-Broadway houses, De La Guarda's "emancipatory spatial praxis"<sup>37</sup> can function as a site of resistance even as it partakes in the very superstructures it often works to subvert. Thus, the following pages explore the various ways in which *Villa Villa*'s spatial praxis potentially disrupts the facile process of mindless consumption, operating as a radical force *within* the system by modeling the carnivalesque spatial practice of another marketplace entirely.

### **Shattering the Paper Ceiling: "Papel"**

Ascending a short flight of stairs which leads to the performance space, I hear a loud yell—the polyphony of several male voices, similar to the pre-game ritual of a football team about to take the field—through the bathroom door. (Later, I learned that the men's dressing room connects to the public restroom via a door that reads "Do Not Enter" and that this yell was actually coming from said dressing room rather than the restroom, as I had initially thought.) Passing through the portal and into the "sacred"

space,<sup>38</sup> I see the community of spectators gathering at the opposite end of the small room. Each of the four walls is covered in black curtains; the only light comes from a smallish fresnel, hung in the southeast corner, and the hallway from which the spectators have just entered. A steady drumbeat from the speakers. Three crewmembers, all dressed in black and equipped with headsets, direct the human traffic away from the entrance, leaving a void in the space near the light. Five or six feet above the audience is a white ceiling comprised of long horizontal strips of paper, each approximately four feet wide—we see lines where these strips have been taped together in order to form a canopy over the increasingly cramped space. In the dim amber light of the fresnel, several small groups converse, couples kiss or embrace; some stare at the empty space in anticipation while others smile eagerly at the paper ceiling. Nearby, a young woman describes the show to her female companions. With the number of spectators growing and my personal space diminishing, I recall the densely populated corridors of Penn Station. Finally, the drumbeat grows in volume and intensity as the light brightens, then . . . blackout. Certain members of the audience sound the junior high school “wooooo” in the darkness. *Villa Villa* begins.

The opening scene takes place on and above the paper canopy just over the spectators' heads. This blank white membrane functions as a temporary movie screen of sorts, distancing the audience from the performance space and strictly delimiting the boundaries between performer and spectator—it is essentially a cinematic-proscenium relationship turned on its head. As the ethereal music fills the air with the oceanic chords of a synthesizer and the delicate accents of bells and chimes, an elongated, slightly inhuman silhouette bathed in pale blue light appears on the white ceiling.

Several spectators point skyward, in hushed voices urging their companions to “Look!” at the peculiar figure looming overhead. Soon, an identical figure joins the first, materializing in the opposite corner of the paper canopy. Immediately, the company invokes images of the supernatural, the extra-ordinary: something strange is happening above the delicate membrane. As the peculiar shadows begin undulating, altering their already distorted outlines, spectators gaze upwards, necks craned, mouths agape. Only some members of the audience can see both silhouettes: simultaneity thus begins to manifest itself as a central performance strategy. The silhouettes shift to fetal positions, spinning horizontally from the cables and harnesses attached to their abdominal regions. In the dim light, the cables appear almost as umbilical cords attached to an unseen mother. Save the repetitive heartbeat, sonorous chords and intermittent chimes of the music, the room is virtually silent. A peaceful womb; tranquil, protective, an insulated haven of sorts.

But the serenity is short-lived: without warning, two performers bathed in orange spotlights race like fireballs across the paper canopy, disappearing as quickly as they emerged. A loud “swoosh” (the sound of air parted by great force—a subsonic boom, if you will) accompanies the fireballs as they penetrate the prenatal image. Throughout the performance, De La Guarda uses the element of surprise to introduce shifts in the atmosphere: placid environments disturbed by sudden bursts of sound, performers emerging in out-of-the-way places, the entire space filled with the potential for action. These unanticipated atmospheric changes expand and dislocate codes of reception. One cannot depend upon previously established systems of meaning or patterns of spatial relations, for *Villa Villa* continually thwarts and refigures the

“horizon of expectations.”<sup>39</sup> It becomes difficult to predict where and when the next shift will occur. No matter where one directs her attention, the possibility that something will happen behind her, above her or right under her nose pervades.

As “Papel” continues, the ceiling becomes a wonderland of abstract imagery, defamiliarizing ordinary bodies and objects while each image fades fluidly into the next. In essence, the company generates an alternative existence in the canopy above, transforming it into what Robert Knopf calls “a microcosmic universe.”<sup>40</sup> While the aerialists soar through their habitat-*sui generis*, the divisive cinematic-proscenium relationship between actor and audience remains intact. For the moment, at least, we can look but cannot touch.

With a shift of the backlight, the ceiling glows a pale, sickly green, perhaps recalling the paranormal atmospherics of a spacecraft or poltergeist; in any case, this glow is un-natural. Soon, hundreds of tiny pellets roll across the ceiling: through the lighting designer’s sleight of hand, these pellets appear in three dimensions on our side of the paper divide, defying the laws of gravity as they congregate in the troughs of the uneven surface. Suddenly, several short bursts of “rain” (actually green and yellow phosphorescent paint) pelt the paper canopy. Very slowly, the alien glow fades and we are left with a starry night sky, an image of the cosmos in neon and black light; it is as if we have been transported to an unpopulated desert or a brilliant planetarium. Each night, the audience gasped at, then applauded this astronomic transformation.

Meanwhile, the chirping of several crickets fills the room. Laser pointers pierce the sky. The beam of an orange flashlight reveals a toy snake slithering across the ceiling, manipulated by a shadowy hand. Silly noises accompany the various lights—

the sound of three or four imps at play. Soon, however, the puckish interchange subsides; lights, toys and performers vanish as the ceiling begins to shake violently, causing several spectators to crouch defensively, to hide behind their companions or, in some cases, complete strangers. The space itself comes alive, asserting its phenomenal presence and activating fields of hitherto latent energy between the viewer, the shared performance space, and the viewed. In other words, when the paper begins to move, the virtual world behind the ceiling infringes upon the real world of the audience beneath. Separation—up to this point the dominant spatial relationship in “Papel”—suddenly seems precarious: these strange shadows can at any time break through the flimsy protective layer that divides “us” from “them.” As co-director Pichon Baldinu explains: “We do not want the audience to just stand there, thinking they are safe.”<sup>41</sup> These instances of (perceived) danger and discomfort reinforce the volatile potential of *Villa Villa* in concrete spatial terms—as if De La Guarda, like Artaud, wants to remind us: “We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads.”<sup>42</sup> And, in the following moments, it will.

A strobe simulates lightning, actor-fireballs flash and fade, fog creeps into the sky. The white canopy changes colors repeatedly, shifting from blue to violet to reddish-pink as we hear the loopy carnival song of a calliope out of tune. Fog begins to drift across the ceiling like cirrus clouds in a time-elapsing film, hundreds of party balloons decorate the rose-colored sky, the music grows in volume, more fireballs, performers fly through the ever-increasing balloon population, a tiny hole opens in the ceiling, spilling toys and cotton balls and confetti on the unsuspecting heads of the spectators below. The fissure expands, giving birth to a red balloon. At one end of the



space, a male performer rips through the paper, hanging upside down from a rappelling cable, not unlike a maniacal bat. Descending almost to floor level, he grabs a woman from her place amongst the crowd and lifts her kicking and screaming into the paper canopy. “As she screams,” Knopf recalls, “the audience tenses again, wondering who will be next. Though the girl turns out to be a plant, it is almost impossible to be certain for the moment.”<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, a female thrusts her foot, then her entire leg through a hole at the opposite end; bits of confetti waft lazily to the floor as members of the audience who stand directly below the protruding limb scatter, laughing nervously, unsure of this disembodied appendage’s intention. The simultaneity of bodies and objects and images in space not only surrounds us with sensory stimuli; it also presents a perceptual field in which spectators can select and direct their focus freely, thus leading to what Gay McAuley labels a certain “independence of vision.”<sup>44</sup> Because “Papel” offers multiple, simultaneous images and actions, there is a great deal of autonomy in the act of reception. In other words, we choose what we experience visually. The picture frame is in this way relativized, a product of agency and positionality rather than that of a unified scenic vision.

Moreover, when these performers violate the sacrosanct actor-audience division, they bring the illusion into the reality, causing the two worlds to intermingle, drawing the audience into the world of the play while concomitantly extending the world of the play outward. Consequently, De La Guarda disrupts, even breaks down the conventional distinctions between perceiver and perceived, allowing them to cohabitate a space that is both illusory and actual, to occupy two realities, neither of which is emphasized more than the other.

De La Guarda intensifies this coincidence of equal realities in the movement's climactic sequence: with an eruption of lights and music, actors swoop down from the heavens, ripping away the paper membrane to reveal a thirty-foot chasm above. Instantaneously, stagehands remove the black curtains lining the walls, exposing three stories of utilitarian scaffolding. A massive, white paper curtain floats from the western wall across the space, over and through the crowd who quickly pushes it aside or tears the paper away in order to claim positions in the new spatial configuration. Given the restrictive sociometric confines of the opening sequence, the rapidity with which the paper curtain falls—or rather, is torn down—is not at all shocking, for this transformation of the physical space is also a liberation of the physical body from the danger and immobility experienced only moments before. In this new configuration, the Daryl Roth seems quite spacious, for the available perceptual field has been radically altered by the sudden revelation of the vastness overhead. Every inch of the space now animated, occupied, energized—there is no “cold zone.” It is as if ripping away the canopy and shedding the curtained walls signals the space's own rite of passage: from claustrophobic beginnings a new spatial ecosystem emerges, full of potential, full of life, ready to submerge the audience in *Villa Villa's* ever-changing atmospheres.<sup>45</sup>

### **In/versions of the Real: Carnival Tempests**

With the collapse of the paper ceiling, the festival begins: a vigorous techno beat kicks in with ear-splitting decibel levels; a ticker-tape blizzard falls from the ceiling; high on the eastern scaffold, crewmembers release hundreds of balloons from an enormous plastic bag; performers nose-dive toward the crowd below, reaching for the outstretched

hands of enthusiastic audience members, flying mere inches from the swarming mass of bodies before lurching back into the sky. Structured chaos. The “big bang” of *Villa Villa*’s theatrical universe. The spatial rite of passage signaled by “Papel” sets in motion a chain reaction that conditions the remainder of the performance: where we once stood as silent observers, immobile, cramped together in the darkness, we now inhabit an open environment where one is free to move about, to choose her position in the matrix of bodies in space, to literally change her point of view. Of course, many spectators remain stationary, glued to the personal space s/he established in the pre-performance gathering. But the point lies in the potential—to navigate the environment without restrictions, to experience from variable perspectives, to intermingle with other bodies in a non-hierarchical space.

In myriad ways, this new environment mirrors the freewheeling spatial dynamics of the carnivalesque marketplace described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*: “The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people.”<sup>46</sup> Here, as in Rabelais’ marketplace, we are free to choose and re-choose our own position in the various constellations of spatial relationships. Every spectator is given the opportunity to move, interact, explore, to join in the celebration. Sedentary, divisive, hierarchical actor-audience relations give way to motion, deterritorialization and democratization, thus creating a potentially radical egalitarianism, a place of ludic liberation, playful anarchy. In fact, this anarchic impulse mirrors precisely the intention of De La Guarda’s creators: as co-director Diqui James explains, “We wanted people to have the feeling that anything could happen, that everything was on the verge of going

out of control.”<sup>47</sup> Action, activity, dis-order is latent in the situation of space. From the fall of the paper ceiling to the final celebration, bodies press against bodies, actor and audience spaces interchange and overlap, roles reverse, the world is created anew. Of course, unlike the Bakhtinian/Rabelaisian carnival, *Villa Villa* does not take place in the open air, does not spill over into the streets and does not possess the entire populace of a given culture for its duration. Nonetheless, the “festive organization of the crowd” becomes *Villa Villa*’s overarching form of spatial composition. To follow Bakhtin further in his description of the festival marketplace:

Even the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed . . . . At the same time, the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, the carnival spirit of bodily interaction and exchange—what Victor Turner might call *spontaneous communitas*<sup>49</sup>—inflects our perception of space from the show’s opening moments, reintroducing the “free and familiar contact” of the marketplace and, through shifting spatial configurations, immersing the entire audience in a series of open, evolving, *living* spaces.<sup>50</sup>

There are limitations and deviations, of course. First, *Villa Villa* is always bound by the external structure of the theatre building, which functions as a physical container as well as a (false) advertisement for the product inside. The four walls of the Daryl Roth enclose the festival, creating a public-private space where *certain* people gather more or less *intentionally*. In other words, the theatre is still a public space, but one that is privatized, compartmentalized, limited to paying customers. Moving the festival from the open air and charging fifty-five bucks for access appears to undermine the carnival’s

egalitarian and communitarian impulse,<sup>51</sup> reinforcing Kershaw's notion of the built-in sociometric discipline of conventional auditoria. However, if we expand Bakhtin's notion of the carnival to include those spaces which bring a modicum of the streets indoors—an alternate mode of interaction and exchange, another way of living—we might find a useful intellectual formation through which to understand the inversions of *Villa Villa*'s environmental spectacle. Thus, I am concerned with the carnivalesque qualities of the performance rather than the strict adherence to Bakhtin's model.

Inverting the conventional distinctions of audience space and actorly space, the segregation of viewer from viewed, De La Guarda recalls the celebratory atmosphere of Bakhtin's carnivalesque marketplace. While the festive organization of space consumes the Daryl Roth throughout, it manifests most clearly in "Fiesta China" (literally "Chinese Party") the fifth and most interactive movement in *Villa Villa*. The *fiesta* begins with a male performer (who will soon become my partner in flight) perched on the highest level of the scaffolding, maniacally yelling gibberish into a microphone. His flight gear consists of sleeveless white coveralls and a red bicycle helmet. A techno beat pumps through the speakers, pushing the decibel level past eleven as the entire company, some equipped with hand-held wireless microphones, disperses throughout the audience to inaugurate the festival. It will only escalate from here. At the end of each musical refrain, the actors pause, chant-sing a brief "aaay" into the microphone, and continue their meandering path through the crowd. In this movement, De La Guarda blurs any sense of spatial demarcation by shedding the flight apparatus and joining the audience in celebration. A performative inversion takes place: the mass spectatorial body literally engulfs those who initially controlled the spatio-temporal

parameters of the performance. The purveyors of the spectacle—formerly a group of privileged “angels” soaring through the heavens—come down to earth, for a time denuded of their mystical, charismatic presence.<sup>52</sup>

“Fiesta China” continues. The now-flightless performers retrieve long strips of dirty white paper—the trampled remnants of the paper curtain—from the sodden ground. A female performer stands alone atop a large platform in the center of the space. As the coverall-clad male flies back and forth across the space, the remaining performers throw large bundles of the soggy paper at their airborne cohort in the midst of each pass. He tries desperately to kick the paper away; some strips remain. On Friday night, two young boys joined in the fray, jubilantly assisting the performers by obtaining their own scraps from the detritus-riddled floor and tossing the paper with all their pre-pubescent might. Little spectators become little performers—for a section of the audience, the theatre becomes a temporary playground. After several “fly-bys,” the crew removes the platform, leaving a wide, unpopulated void in the center of the space. Once again we return to the festive marketplace, a space of possibles where bodies interact freely, space-fields commingle and the division between spectator and spectacle breaks down. It is in this nonmatrixed environment that most of De La Guarda’s (in)famous actor-audience exchanges occur.

As the lights rise to full intensity—exposing audience members, actors, climbers, crewmembers, and even the shadowy crevices of the scaffolding to the field of vision—performers initiate contact throughout the space. On Thursday night, my hair is tousled by a male performer, who then presses his body against mine in a soggy embrace before moving on to a couple of females nearby. He places an arm around each

of them; both smile sheepishly as he allows them to bear the sagging weight of his wet body. Friday: another performer roots through an older woman's purse with the impish grin of a curious scavenger. Saturday: a female performer kisses a teenage boy on the cheek, leaving the bright red outline of her lips as a souvenir. Inevitably, performers ask audience members to jump up and down or dance with one another, often pushing strangers together in hopes that they will interface, connect, share in the euphoria of the moment. Throughout *Villa Villa*'s seventy minutes, many such microperformances take place, usually involving one-on-one or one-on-few relationships between performers and spectators.

The hair-tousler, the purse-scavenger, the boy-kisser and all the dancing bodies typify the diffusive, self-organizing spatial praxis of the carnival. In these small-scale mini-spectacles, De La Guarda transforms the space into a variable constellation of spontaneous and simultaneous interpersonal transactions. One's experience of the event becomes less a question of coordinates or position than a haptic, intimate encounter with bodied spaces rather than spatialized bodies.<sup>53</sup> Here, the bodies of the performers are not organized in a distant perceptual field in order to be consumed as objects of spatiality, but function as the very source of spatiality itself. Location, perspective and experience radiate from the immediacy of the physical encounter. (Dis)orientation originates in the active process of perceiving instead of the sociometrics of the auditorium. Thus, the hierarchical structure of conventional theatre breaks down in a multilayered disarrangement of localized performances. Power is decentralized, circulating among isolated yet interconnected units of performer-spectator contact. Jurisdiction over the active performance space—the “place where things happen,” if

you will—shifts as the line between actor and spectator dissolves in a carnivalesque mélange of perceptual dislocations, simultaneous histrionics and sexual play. Here, we are all actors; we are all spectators.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile, the eccentric aerialist from the beginning of this sequence—still connected to his rope and harness—runs around the center of the space, scanning the audience for his first “victim.” Aided by a fellow performer, the man procures a member of the audience, straps her or him to his own body using a mini-harness and proceeds to take flight. During his initial takeoff, however, the assistant rips off the aerialist’s coveralls, revealing his bare ass—a burlesque sight gag which invariably received approving laughter from the crowd below. This is the most blatant example of one kind of sexual play that permeates *Villa Villa*: the grotesque. This is not, *per se*, the “grotesque realism” that Bakhtin described so vividly in *Rabelais*; however, there is a connection between carnival and sexuality which correlates with the spatial dynamics of the performance. The company plays with varying levels of intimacy or familiarity, infusing the “high” culture of the contemporary theatre estate with the “low” culture of the fairground and the animal body. Although De La Guarda does not typically exalt in bodily functions, there is something to be said for the incongruity between “guardian angels” and exposed buttocks: it demonstrates the high/low paradox at work. Indeed, *Villa Villa*’s sexual overtones—sweaty bodies colliding in midair, a plethora of kisses (if only on the cheek), the transfer of perspiration, gyrations, ecstatic release—bring the performers down from their lofty position to join the groundlings in the proverbial fray. As Susan Bennett notes, such “unconventional use of space and re-ordering is not, of course, innovatory but it does challenge accepted notions of high culture.”<sup>55</sup> Hence, the



immediate proximity of actor-audience relations in De La Guarda's microperformances demonstrates this "bringing low" as it manifests in physical space. Ironically, the fact that most of these "groundlings" can afford a premium ticket price further undermines the ideology of commercial theatre, for it places spectators in the realm of the body: sweaty, sensual performers—manifestations of the low—interact with the high of these privileged audience members.

Simultaneously, while performers fall from the sky, some spectators are quite literally lifted up. Rewind to Thursday night: the soon-to-be naked aerialist has chosen a young blonde woman to join him in flight. She flashes a nervous smile as an assistant straps her in. Her flight commences. His ass emerges. Laughter. The tandem rises. Ruetalo describes the dual effect of this spectatorial flight: as the blonde woman circles high above the crowd,

the rest of the audience witnesses [one] of their "own" members being pulled into the chain of the performative machine, the apparatus that at first belonged only to the performers. Yet, at the same time, they become aware of their complicity with the performance as their bodies are inserted into the spatial matrix.<sup>56</sup>

The addition of spectatorial bodies into the "performative machine" empowers the audience, in many ways conjoining them in a mutual performance-dream: the body of the blonde woman stands in for the collective body of the audience, giving "the people as a whole" controlling interest in the means of production. Once again, spectators become actors and *vice versa*, destabilizing the hierarchical breakdown of traditional theatre. Lowly spectators temporarily secure high positions of power. Not unlike the "mock crownings" of Rabelais, in which the clown or fool ascends the hierarchy, "the play of the upper with lower sphere . . . the top and the bottom, heaven and earth,

merge” in the ascension of the spectator-king or -queen.<sup>57</sup> Thus, we have here several levels of the high/low interplay that conditions the carnivalesque.

Upon landing, the now-naked aerialist searches the crowd once again and repeats the flight sequence at least twice (Thursday and Friday included three flights; an additional flight occurred on Saturday). The repetition of these spectatorial flights amplifies the reflexive nature of positionality in the spatial topography. In the act of locating the spectator-aerialist in the performance space, we must also locate ourselves. After the last spectator returns safely to the ground, audience members swarm into the central void, filling the entire space with bodies as the company launches a six-minute dance party. Repetitively chant-singing an indecipherable lyric (on paper it reads “rakataka,” but in performance it sounds more like a disconnected jumble of syllables), performers cavort with the audience, encouraging people to leap high into the air, to reach for the sky or stomp on the floor, dance, laugh, scream, pushing them to release their inhibitions in a space of complete self-abandon. On several occasions, an actor shoved a microphone in front of a spectator’s face, allowing her to join in the chant, to create her own incomprehensible utterance or vocalize her emotions in a stream of expressive force; in any case, the addition of spectatorial voices only adds to the chaotic soundscape. A sense of joy permeates the space: bouncing bodies colliding, arms thrust heedlessly into the air, childlike perma-smiles on the faces of the middle-aged, laughter abounds. With a final burst of frenetic energy, the crowd erupts in cheers and applause as the theatre goes dark and the festival comes to a close. In the following moments, the audience space will settle, the performers will return to the skies and the pandemonium of the carnival will give way to a series of evocative images and atmospheres carved out

of the flying space above; however, the joyous traces of the festival, the ludic flows of the marketplace linger in the ever-shifting constellations of bodied spaces which continue to intermingle throughout the performance.

This carnivalesque spatial praxis works to generate a festive chronotope,<sup>58</sup> a playful time-space in which “life is subject only to its own laws only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.”<sup>59</sup> Following environmental theatre practitioners and scenographers of the second half of the twentieth century, *Villa Villa* thus attempts to create a self-contained whole, a complete environment shared by all. And yet, if the performance creates the rules of the game as it unfolds in time and space, it also feeds into and is fed by the regulations of its context. Reality is contingent, at once outside and a part of the phenomenal real. As Derrida concludes in his critique of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, the cycle of representation is never closed.<sup>60</sup> In fact, much of *Villa Villa*’s power lies in the feedback between its imaginary world and the (often equally imaginary) material world operating just beyond the Daryl Roth’s doors. In the following section, I will explore the ways in which De La Guarda destabilizes reality and, in the process, creates a new reality formation through its manipulation of the spectacular environment.

### **Strange Showers Indeed: Worldmaking, Spectacle and Environment**

Inverting theatrical and behavioral norms through the festive organization of the crowd, *Villa Villa* generates a carnivalesque field of interactions in which spectacular and environmental spaces commingle to produce “a peculiar second world.”<sup>61</sup> Here, a little universe comes into being, a tempest swirls around the audience, flying is the

predominant metaphor—elements of spectacle create the absent space of referential signification. At the same time, it also a phenomenological event-in-process, a “real” experience which resides in the physical present—elements of the environment affect the senses directly, producing a kind of “lived, or inhabited, spatiality, with its perceptual contours and structures of orientation.”<sup>62</sup> Following Deleuze and Guattari, we can therefore think of *Villa Villa* as a performative “rhizome” in which two realities hybridize, always becoming one another but forever incomplete, “always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.”<sup>63</sup> This rhizomatic quality dislodges the frame that separates “as is” from “as if,” blurring the boundaries between the real and the subjunctive, the concrete and the contingent: a crack in the paper ceiling rains balloons and ticker tape on the audience, the outstretched hand of a sodden aerialist reaches for assistance, spatter of warm water on the plastic poncho of a middle-aged businesswoman in gold earrings. Spectacular representation dissolves into the materiality of environmental performance. The result is a labile space in which the “natural” laws of the everyday intertwine with the “super-natural” laws of the performance world to create a new, unstable reality-formation that lies somewhere betwixt and between the phenomenal and the fantastic.

Flight, or flying, is the basic *modus operandi* of this dual reality system; it is the prevailing metaphor and the undeniable actuality of the performance. As performers-in-flight turn the spatial matrix on its head, the physics of gravity appear to maintain at best a tenuous grip. Actors-cum-angels signal a transformation of ordinary existence, the manifestation of Nietzsche’s sublime performance-dream. Inside this flight simulator, the audience is immersed in a realm of possibles, a fantastical world built

upon the ideology of rising, freedom, transcendence. At the same time, however, the company never conceals the apparatus which produces the simulated images: harnesses and cables allow the performers to “fly,” a system of mechanized pulleys raises and lowers actors as they walk up and across the wall. The theatricalized nature of these images is never in doubt, for the means of production are always in plain view. Alienation always already intrudes on imaginative projection—we cannot suspend our disbelief. Like the Rabelaisian carnival, this alternative world “belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.”<sup>64</sup> As such, the performance is neither theatrical illusion nor unmediated actuality; it is never un-real but always just play. Fiction dislocates reality and *vice versa*. In a unique instance, a climber asked one of my companions to hold a rope which helped suspend a large group of performers in midair. As the aerialists dangled high above the audience, she was quite literally given the reins of the production apparatus. Much like the spectatorial flights described in the previous section, this role-reversal not only empowered a particular spectator—and, through identificatory operations, the collective audience—but also reiterated the influence of “real-time” and “-space.” This perpetual *verfremdung* contributes further to the substantiation of the performance, thereby maintaining a spatiotemporal link with the sociopolitical reality of the world outside.

Of course, belying Bakhtin, the production cannot take place “outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization,”<sup>65</sup> for theatre always engages in a feedback loop with its context.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, being a popular off-Broadway institution situated in the commercial

environs of Union Square, this particular production is always already embedded within the architectonic and ideologic disciplinary system of the late capitalist cultural marketplace. However, as I will argue, the creation of *Villa Villa*'s spectacular environment ruptures the cycle of mainstream dispossession, opening a crease in the spatial and ideological hierarchy for carnivalesque "worldmaking."<sup>67</sup>

Worldmaking is a process articulated by José Esteban Muñoz in which spectators collaborate with performers to produce "a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present."<sup>68</sup> Although Muñoz concerns himself specifically with queer worldmaking, this notion readily crosses sexual and sociopolitical borders to speak to those who would resist cultural hegemonies, imagine alternatives to monologic versions of reality and challenge the systems that hold oppressive ideologies in place.

The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of "truth" that subjugate minoritarian people. . . . Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable.<sup>69</sup>

Where Muñoz focuses upon the mental or conceptual space of these "alternative vistas," I am concerned primarily with transmutations of physical space, with how changes in the performance environment construct an/other world. In fact, the world of De La Guarda is more than a vista, for it is the entire body, rather than the perceptual eye/I, that partakes in the spectacle. In a very concrete way, the audience endures the "transportation"—defined by Schechner as a temporary, non-permanent transformation (of consciousness, identity, status, state of being, etc.)—along with the performers.<sup>70</sup>

These corporeal connections to the environment underline the rhizomatic nature of *Villa Villa*'s spatial reality: this “world in itself”<sup>71</sup> is not completely set aside from everyday existence, nor does it participate fully in the flow of political or economic actualities. When the paper ceiling shatters to initiate these extra-ordinary carnival tempests, the inverse—the normative power structure inscribed in the sociometrics of New York City, Union Square and the Daryl Roth—is always present. Our transportation is never complete. Instead, the performance straddles two realities equally and at the same time: it is a collision of the verifiable and the virtual, actuality-becoming-possibility in a disjointed space that is neither completely quotidian nor completely theatrical. This dual nature of the spatial reality “reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature.”<sup>72</sup> In this way, De La Guarda provides an unstable space—not always and not for everyone, but the potential inheres—in which reality itself can be transformed.

“Bollo” (Roll, or Ball), the second of *Villa Villa*'s eleven movements, begins with a powerful gust of wind from each of two large industrial fans positioned between the first and second levels of the scaffolding. A light mist blows across the audience. Fog creeps into the space, lingers. Many cover their heads with jackets and sweaters; others simply let the tiny droplets wash over them with a giddy, if somewhat hesitant, smile. A tiny blonde girl, eight or nine years old, huddles under the coat of a man who appears to be her father. The well-prepared businesspeople who have gathered in the southeast corner of the space don plastic parkas to shield themselves—and their designer suits—from the spray. Orange searchlights cut through the haze, moving back

and forth over the heads of the audience members. Senses literally saturated, my fellow spectators and I are quickly herded out of the way as a group of crewmembers rolls a six-foot platform into the position we had inhabited moments before. The crew locks down the wheels, tests the stability of the platform, then recedes into darkness beneath the scaffolding. In the opposite corner of the space, an identical platform mirrors the one that has just displaced me. Even as the performative atmosphere begins to engulf the space, these crewmembers and mobile platforms serve as Brechtian reminders that the budding tempest is a manufactured one. Although illusion or simulation threatens to obscure the real, the construction of the theatrical environment is always perceptible.

Shifting focus to the flying space, several performers have merged to form a singular mass of bodies—*un bollo*, as it were—swinging through the space, crying out for assistance as they struggle against the torrents of the (simulated) storm. A climber douses the group with a pressurized water hose; the audience titters with terror and delight as the fine mist which began this scenario becomes a light shower. Crashes of thunder resonate through the amplifiers and against the walls. Light(ning) flashes illuminate the hazy room. While the undulating ball of heads and limbs and cries continues swinging through the thick air and the unrelenting spray of the climber's hose, crewmembers relocate the audience once again, this time clearing a large circular space approximately fifteen feet in diameter in the center of the crowd. Now it is the spectators who form the cluster of bodies—rubbing against one another, scents intermingling, a stranger's hand touches the back of my forearm; my first impulse leads me to recoil. Packed together in an assembly of the willing(?), we are unable to maintain our usually comfortable spatial boundaries.



Various critics have described “Bollo” as a “rainforest,” “an indoor monsoon,” or even the “nursery of life itself”<sup>73</sup>—all of which recall a certain affinity with nature and the elements. However, interpretations rarely penetrate beyond these obvious semiotic connections, for the group wants to elicit physical and emotional responses that move beyond the iconicity or illusionism of traditional theatre, shifting the nature of the spectacle from textual interpretation to haptic immersion. Baldinu further elucidates the matter:

None of this is pretend. We give people real actions. When we fly, it is real. When you are in a storm, you feel real wind. The people jumping and dancing next to you are real people who make you want to jump and dance even more.<sup>74</sup>

In this spectacular environment, the presence of real water and wind seeks to transcend structures of meaning, offering instead a series of phenomenal events which arouse and/or agitate our sense perceptions. We are, for better or worse, literally enveloped by the material presence—the phenomenological self-givenness<sup>75</sup>—of the spectacle. Thus, the relationship between the body and its environment becomes a visceral one, based in physical rather than intellectual connections and responses. It is not through psychic projection but actual, bodily submersion that *Villa Villa* situates its audience in what Victor Turner calls “the subjunctive mood.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, we need not *project* ourselves into the illusory world of “as if;” we *live* in it.

In this subjunctive world, the ebb and flow of spectatorial bodies is often a product of more or less fluid transitions in the environment. Foreign objects move through “natural” space, everything happens simultaneously, the atmosphere seems to change like the weather (pardon the pun). Platforms displace the nomad audience, restructuring our experience of space by introducing a manufactured, un-natural edifice

into the habitat. As a result, we must be on the move, frequently changing our position and consequently our perceptual relationship with the environment. Once again, the company seeks to create a world in which the spectator is connected corporeally to spectacular events *as they unfold*. Thus, the mobile platforms redirect the flow of bodies and energies, cutting a swath through the spatial matrix in order to first redistribute those energies and, finally, to transform the spatial topography. It is the same with tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, and bulldozers. Moreover, the intrusion of such structures rescripts the passive codes of reception used in conventional theatre by forcing the spectator to shift to another vantage point, making him see the performance from a different perspective. To quote Deleuze and Guattari, “Orientations are not constant but change according to temporary vegetation, occupations, and precipitation.”<sup>77</sup>

In this case, “precipitation” is more than a figure of speech. The profusion of water, which cascades onto actors as well as audience members from sprinklers mounted in the rafters, provides the performance-world with something of an atmospheric through-line. States describes the phenomenology of water on stage:

Some things, by virtue of their nature, retain an exceptional degree of self-givenness on stage. . . . [R]eal water—unlike real chairs, clothing, flower vases, or the painted façades of a village square—retains a certain primal strangeness: its aesthetic function does not exhaust its interest. It is a happening taking place within the aesthetic world: with running water something indisputably leaks out of the illusion.<sup>78</sup>

Because water is not easily reduced to sign-hood, it produces in the spectator a substantive perceptual encounter with the actual spaces s/he inhabits. Six of *Villa* *Villa*'s eleven movements utilize running water in some way, with two additional scenes reproducing the aural sensation via soundtracks. I have already described, for example, the use of water in “Bollo.” In “Ducha” (Shower), which immediately follows

“Bollo,” a female performer rises from the southeast platform for ritual cleansing, bathing in the flow of a long cataract that falls from the ceiling. The second “Escenario” (Scene) is a variation on the same theme: in the opposite corner of the space, a male performer stands beneath a thin but powerful stream, singing to the cosmos as the water drenches his hair, face, clothes. Excess water splashes audience members (myself included) who are positioned near the platform. A child whispers excitedly, “It’s warm!” It is. Yet another variation, “Enroscado” (Coil), is an airborne duet in which a male and female embrace through a mini-waterfall that stretches from ceiling to floor. The pattern repeats several times, connecting each movement with the others while creating a unique environment specific to the images at hand. This reoccurrence of running water (and, to a lesser extent, the recorded water sounds) functions as connective tissue in the environment. In fact, during much of *Villa Villa* it is “raining” inside our habitat.

Infiltrating personal space, the environmental spectacle dislocates the real via “the wholesale destabilization of signification through spectacle.”<sup>79</sup> Actual wind and water is also simulated wind and water, spectacular effect and phenomenological given. A field of signification slides into fields of actuality, the spectacular deconstructs the environmental deconstructs the spectacular. This polyvalent slippage in the theatrical frame produces a disjuncture: while the performance world can be considered an iconic representation of an “actual” storm, one cannot deny the physical reality of it all. Each mode of existence (the theatrical and the actual) is embedded within the other.

The extension of the spectacle into the furthest recesses of the environment places the spectatorial body in direct contact with multiple constructions of reality.

Here, the real is located in the spectacular representation, in its carnivalesque inversion, in the simulation of natural events (rain, wind, etc.) and, finally, in the material construction of our immediate environment. Being theatre, *Villa Villa* is not real. However, the materiality of water or bodies-in-flight is not not real. At the same time, this materiality is not “natural;” it is, rather, a kind of manufactured or extra-ordinary materiality and therefore not real. Yet, because this extra-ordinary materiality comprises the ground upon which we stand and the rules of the performative habitat in which we live, it is not not real. This space of swirling reality-formations initiates a process that Kershaw describes as “a sudden gap opening up between different ontologies or versions of the real, a kind of fissure in the way that knowledge of the world is usually assembled.”<sup>80</sup> By changing the nature of our “being-in-the-world,” radical intervention becomes possible.

Hence, this is not a docile world, ready-made for consumption by the passive viewer. Quite the contrary, the spatial ecosystem assaults the sensibilities of theatregoers accustomed to such passive, anonymous, voyeuristic breeds of spectatorship. As Susan Bennett notes in her study of theatre audiences: “Contemporary audiences in theatre buildings are . . . most used to fixed stage-auditorium relationships, and the predominance of this convention has led to its necessity for a comfortable theatrical experience.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, transgressing the norms of conventional spectacle-spectator relations, the performance situates the audience in a disconcerting space that demands movement, confrontation, a new mode of experiencing. The e/motional volatility of the space does not allow for easy consumption, for the environmental spectacle challenges spectator-participants to join in what Clifford Geertz calls “deep

play,”<sup>82</sup> a performative symbolic activity in which those who partake simultaneously 1) become totally absorbed; 2) risk a temporary loss of some kind; and 3) consciously or not, engage in a “metasocial commentary” upon the culture in which they live.<sup>83</sup> Geertz excavates the concept of deep play from social psychologist Jeremy Bentham, for whom the term designates “play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his [Bentham’s] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all.”<sup>84</sup> For Geertz, however, the substance of deep play lies beyond notions of relative utility or disutility, for it is not material goods or even social status that is at stake in such activities, but the “real” currency of symbolic representation, the hermeneutical contours of society as we perform it to ourselves. In the case of *Villa Villa*, one might say that freedom—or at least the way we know freedom—is at stake in this performative world, for in many ways liberation, autonomy and empowerment is precisely what we are playing at, commenting upon and, when it succeeds, living. Thus, the dynamics of control—freedom and coercion, agency and dispossession—take on a special importance in this environment.

Paradoxically, the performance encourages ludic interaction and psychophysical immersion even as it denies escape. On the one hand, it facilitates maximum freedom of movement and perspectival variation, thereby empowering the spectator to engage in-depth with the physical space and its inhabitants, to explore the limits of his or her environment. In the aforementioned dance party, for instance, “[spectators] can decide how they want to be part—shouting, jumping, dancing.”<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, the performers often violate our comfort zones, a risky maneuver which could very well reproduce the kind of dispossession that De La Guarda wants to transcend. What of

those spectators who have no desire to shout, jump or dance? Doesn't Baldinu's statement omit a certain percentage of audience members who do not want to participate, to play deeply? What about those who do not want to play at all?

De La Guarda's sensory assault—the festivities of the carnival, the phenomenal excess of the tempest, the various microperformances, etc.—often induces what Artaud described as a “genuine enslavement of attention,” in which bodies/images/sound waves/objects in space surround the audience, demanding nothing less than “total involvement.”<sup>86</sup> For much of the performance, it becomes virtually impossible to disengage oneself in spite of all attempts to the contrary. Instead, as co-creator James declares, we must resignedly take pleasure in the ride: “If you're in a big storm in the middle of the sea, you have to say, ‘OK, I'm going to enjoy this.’ *You have no other choice*. This is the same, emotional sensation.”<sup>87</sup> Here, James reveals a profound contradiction: on one level, De La Guarda wants to free the spectator from the limitations of everyday behavior while, on another, it denies her any choice in the matter. The spatial configurations and proxemic relationships illustrate this paradoxical strategy, for there is something coercive about the fact that the environment extends to the furthest reaches of the space and that one cannot avoid contact with performers, crewmembers, platforms or, in the cases of “Papel” and “Bollo” especially, with the environment itself (e.g. rain, wind, ticker tape, toys, balloons, the paper ceiling, etc.). Critic Fintan O'Toole of London's *Daily News* describes this sense of alienation and subjugation:

There is an artistic point being made: that the performers have power over the audience and see no reason not to abuse it. “Villa Villa” is a hip, highly praised show. Only someone supremely uncool could object to being pushed around, groped, mauled and treated as a convenient prop for the

performance. . . . The truth is that De La Guarda presents about 45 minutes of real performance. It disguises this fact by pure aggression, bludgeoning the audience into submission with strength, noise and the power of embarrassment.<sup>88</sup>

I witnessed or participated in several microperformances that would seem to confirm O'Toole's accusations. During Thursday's version of "Fiesta China," for instance, one of the male performers convened with an older woman, probably sixty-five to seventy, who was positioned just behind me. I turned to observe the interaction: as the actor approaches, the woman giggles nervously, looking around the space as if to say, "Please, God, anyone but me." Of course, she instantly becomes a target: the man inches closer, circles behind his prey curiously and then starts rummaging through the woman's purse. After he removes her wallet, he places my arm around her shoulder, presumably to comfort her. She looks at me with a hesitant smile (her ambivalence is unmistakable) as this curious scavenger examines her license. Finally, he returns the license to the wallet and the wallet to the purse; then, with a kiss on the cheek, he disappears into the crowd.

Indeed, such aggressive interpersonal contact is on one level coercive; however, it is always permeated by the Batesonian metacommunication "This is play."<sup>89</sup> What Mr. O'Toole labels gropings and maulings may denote sexual advances or even violations of socio-sexual boundaries, but they do not denote what not "actual" harassment would denote. They are, rather, "playful nips and bites" which reflexively point to the notion of violation, but do not execute the violation itself.<sup>90</sup> When the performer roots through the woman's purse, he does so with the mutual understanding that her wallet will be returned. The actual loss of property is not really at issue. Here, the "intrusion" is only a nip, a playful transgression of personal boundaries.

Of course, there is a very real danger of crossing the line, going beyond the limits of the play frame. In yet another example, this one from Saturday night, an actor who recognized me from the two previous shows lifted my shirt, placed his lips on my bare skin and laid a sloppy raspberry on my belly—certainly not an invited or expected intrusion. I witnessed a similar event the previous evening when one of the spectators chosen to fly had his shirt ripped off by this same actor. Later, I talked to the shirtless man, asking him whether he was embarrassed or offended by the performer's actions. As it turns out, he knew the actor and believed that "it's all part of the show. And I thought the show was amazing. But John [the perpetrator of the shirt-removal] is still a prick." In his case as well as my own, the intrusion was accepted as an inevitable component of *Villa Villa's* ludic environment.<sup>91</sup>

These "violations" of personal space, both individual and collective, are at the ambivalent heart of the performance. In fact, much of *Villa Villa's* appeal lies in this body-to-body and spectacle-to-body contact, in the intermixing of performance space and personal space. At the same time, such intimate encounters potentially cause spectators such as O'Toole to feel "bludgeoned into submission" by the closeness and immediacy of the experience. After all, aerialists repeatedly dive-bomb the audience, platforms force us to change position, the little girl must hide beneath her father's coat during the rainstorm, the woman's personal effects are revealed to her fellow participants, as is my stomach and the man's naked torso. Like the tempest of "Bollo" and the spectacle of flight, these transgressions are concurrently real and not not real: the terms and conditions of deep play always frame this rhizomatic world even as the boundaries between reality and fantasy break down. While these performative acts



would be forbidden in the “real” world—to this day, I have never received a raspberry on my belly from a stranger in public—here, such temerity is integral. The company acknowledges the impossibility of initiating this type of interaction in everyday life:

We would like to bewitch you all, to thrill you like crazy and get under your clothes, *but we don't know how to do this; that's why we do De La Guarda*. (Nevertheless we have the secret hope that you will feel a tingling passing through you.)<sup>92</sup>

In the mundane world outside, De La Guarda cannot “thrill you like crazy and get under your clothes,” for the conventions and codes of normative social interaction prohibits such behavior—a fact that is not lost on the participants. We know that rummaging through a stranger’s purse or ripping off a man’s shirt crosses the line of “proper” deportment; society has taught us as much. However, it is in the line-crossing that the performance enters the realm of deep play. To perform, enact, embody transgression is to play with the line itself. Although the risk of embarrassment or even dispossession runs high, the fact that this carnivalesque world paradoxically requires exhilaration *and invasion* brings into light the very nature of our freedom. Here, we are in essence playing at the game of power. The dual nature of this reality formation only raises the stakes.

Hence, in spite of their claims to the contrary,<sup>93</sup> De La Guarda manipulates the space in such a way that it forces the spectator to confront the performance and, in doing so, herself. Cruelty is not the issue; nor is transgression. Rather, after the initial shock that comes with the contravention of theatrical norms,<sup>94</sup> *Villa Villa* presents spectators with a decision: engage in the performative ebb and flow of the living environment or remain uninvolved. To choose the former leads to inclusion and, perhaps paradoxically, “control of the *performancē*”<sup>95</sup> to choose the latter leads to

exclusion, a shallow(er) experience. Of course, there are varying degrees of engagement and withdrawal, ranging from Dionysian abandon to physical or psychic alienation—the commitment of one’s decision to play determines the depth of one’s involvement—but, fundamentally, it is still a matter of choice. The performance places the spectator on the precipice of inclusion or exclusion and asks for a decision.

Perhaps Bakhtin’s notion of *carnival ambivalence*, the “two-faced Janus” of the festival,<sup>96</sup> best summarizes the paradox, for the decision is never a matter of either/or. In fact, we might even consider *Villa Villa*’s deep play a mutation of the “billingsgate abuses” typical of the Rabelaisian marketplace, characterized by “the passing from excessive praise to excessive invective.”<sup>97</sup> In this case, praise and abuse are not linguistic but bodily, a mode of interaction that is at once assertive, intimate, playful, and disconcerting. “Disquietful” perhaps, but certainly not cruel.<sup>98</sup> Rather than shock the senses into the realm of a more profound truth, the environmental spectacle urges the audience to participate in *and* recognize the inverted reality of (the) play. This is an important aspect of the performance, for it resists what Marco de Marinis calls “the passive and standardized means of consumption found in mainstream theatre.”<sup>99</sup> Like the Rabelaisian carnival, De La Guarda presents a world-in-process that demands physical as well as psychical involvement—“there is no other life outside it.”<sup>100</sup> However this habitat is open to performative intervention (ambivalent though such intervention may be); instead of presenting a complete or “closed” text to be read from afar,<sup>101</sup> the world that *Villa Villa* makes presents another way of living, a more egalitarian, challenging, ludic, fantastical means of existence. In the face of capitalist dispossession, disciplinary systems of the state and otherwise, this performative

lifestyle—this genus of deep play—might, as Kershaw idealistically puts it, “reinforce a sense of the commonly human in the performative society.”<sup>102</sup> The final section therefore moves outside the Daryl Roth, navigating the liminal-liminoid space between these carnival tempests and the “performative society” in which De La Guarda resides in order to examine the possibilities of a radical spatial (or, rather, *placial*) praxis in the proverbial backyard of the theatre estate.

### **Placial Trans/formations**

While Ngugi wa Thiong’o finds in space “the real magic and power of performance;” it is ostensibly in the construction of place that performance “incorporates the architectural space of material or immaterial walls into itself and becomes a magic sphere made still by its own motion—but it is potentially explosive, or rather, it is poised to explode.”<sup>103</sup> This terminological shift from space to place indicates the kind of physical and conceptual incorporation that might lend De La Guarda’s carnivalesque explosions a degree of radical potency in the larger social discourse. Philosopher Edward S. Casey explains:

Just as imagination takes us forward into the realm of the purely possible—into what *might be*—so memory brings us back into the domain of the actual and the already elapsed: to what *has been*. Place ushers us into what *already is*: namely, the enviroing subsoil of our embodiment, the bedrock of our being-in-the-world. In imagining and remembering, we go into the ethereal and the thick respectively. By being in place, we find ourselves in what is subsistent and enveloping.<sup>104</sup>

History and imagination find their place, as it were, in the site of performative utterance, *in praesenti*, as the event unfolds. Casey continues:

A place is more an *event* than a *thing* to be assimilated to known categories. [. . .] Rather than being one definite sort of thing—for example, physical,

spiritual, cultural, social—a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only *are*, they *happen*.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, to speak of place in theatrical terms is to recognize that the contents, constituents and cultural circumstances animate the sense of place. Place, in turn, establishes itself in the process of performance and vanishes when the performance is over. As a result, place is not a predetermined, monolithic construct but rather a relational sequence of subjects, objects, inter-actions and texts that fill a site for a given duration.

So, if place happens in the present of event-time and constitutes “the bedrock of our being-in-the-world,” how does a carnivalesque performance such as *Villa Villa* retain the potential to invert the hegemonic ideologies of its placial context? If this rhizomatic world-in-process generates a rupture in the real, might it transform the dominant reality-formations that condition perception and behavior? Situated in the heart of the Manhattan cityscape, the disciplinary systems maintained by the sociometric architectonics of the theatre building and the capitalist semiotics of Union Square (along with, of course, the festive spatial praxis of the performance) constitutes *Villa Villa*’s placial context, its sense of place. Where every-place around the Daryl Roth—including the external appearance of the Daryl Roth itself—is designed in the service of order, profit and/or the eradication of human agency, the festive world created inside the theatre provides a space for liberation, empowerment, autonomy, affective explosions. That said, the following question guides the remainder of this analysis: moving inside-out, can the performance successfully re-imagine, revise, reform the sense of place? Working in concentric circles from the performance to the Daryl Roth to Union Square, then gazing outward to the larger placial dynamics of New

York City and the global village, I will focus on the paradoxical relationships between interior and exterior, theatre space and social space, exploring the various ways in which *Villa Villa* sidesteps (or oversteps) the boundaries of its context to effect creative, radical trans/formations of place.

Following Michael Hays' theory of locale as structuring principle, we can see how *Villa Villa* contradicts and subverts its architectural container. According to Hays, the place of performance transmits to potential spectators cognitive and spatial maps of the events that occur inside its walls as well as the relationship between the performance and its sociocultural context.

It is, in fact, the choice of location which first announces the conceptual as well as the spatial structure of the theater event, since the position, size, and shape of the place determine the physical and perceptual relationships between the participants as well as their number. Temporally, visually, and conceptually, the theater itself provides us with an initial glimpse of the way in which the lived experience of the performance is organized as a structural whole. And it is also this theater space which first allows us to propose a connection between the ordering principles of the theater event and those of society at large.<sup>106</sup>

The Daryl Roth Theatre is an old U. S. Savings Bank built in the Federalist style, a Roman-esque aesthetic found in many governmental buildings throughout the nation (most notably those of the legislative machine in Washington, DC) whose “name may have derived . . . from the new period that followed on the Constitution’s strengthening of a central federal government.”<sup>107</sup> As a result, its alabaster hues, neoclassical portico, symmetrical columns and dignified presence serve as the architectural citation of state power and the maintenance of order. Located on the eastern corner of Union Square, the building’s façade occupies a much larger portion of the sidewalk than other theatres in the vicinity. Indeed, its sheer size lends the building an air of societal import: another

hulking edifice of officialdom. Thus, the external appearance communicates a kind of historical collusion with structures of governmental authority. Furthermore, adorned with only a plain red banner bearing the words “De La Guarda” stenciled in black and white block letters, this frontage appears rather outmoded next to the flashy neon signs of its corporate neighbors. In fact, the surface hails a different type of audience altogether: if, as Gay McAuley posits, “the location . . . makes some kind of statement about who is expected or encouraged to participate and who might feel discouraged from attempting to do so,”<sup>108</sup> the Roth interpellates suit-clad businessfolk not unlike the group I observed during “Bollo.” So, abiding by Hays’s theory, the performance *should* be organized around principles of order, discipline, authority, conservatism and maintenance of the official hierarchy, for the “initial glimpse” proffered by its architectural container indicates as much.

However, as we have seen, the festive organization of the space inside the theatre is patently opposed to notions of order, discipline and authority. Role-reversals and mock crownings invert the hierarchy of traditional theatrical exchange. The bank has been gutted, the auspices of (monetary) power removed. Scaffolds, tempests and flights of angels replace safes, cashiers and loan officers. A site of monetary transactions becomes a ludic space rooted in physical proximity and emotional effusion. Here, those designer business suits are out of place—anything-but-couture parkas shield them from the spray. What is more, *Villa Villa*’s rhizomatic world integrates the reality principles of so-called “natural” discourse and, as I asserted in the previous section, transforms the “really real” into a fantastical realm of possibilities. As water and debris accumulate on the floor of an institution once considered an architectural extension of

the state, *Villa Villa* makes a mess of official ground. Playfully, dis-orderliness comes to govern governmental space.

Thus, De La Guarda's spatial praxis undermines the horizon of expectations generated by the neoclassical façade. The spatial and conceptual event-structure augured by the outside is transformed, at least metaphorically, from within. Because both have profound influence upon the constitution of place, what happens inside the theatre space alters the ideological structures inscribed on the exterior of the building. Where the old U. S. Savings Bank speaks the language of governmental authority and economic power and (falsely) prognosticates as much for the events that will take place inside, *Villa Villa* speaks a different language altogether. Here, inside the space, bodies and objects are not spatialized through the monologic architectural utterance of the state, but rather through the self-organizing spatial praxis of the festival. In a minor but telling modification, the entrance has been moved to a side street: we access the Daryl Roth's lobby through a pair of unassuming glass doors—the intimidating columned portico no longer forms the threshold between real space and theatrical space. Although this change in the point of entry is likely unintentional, necessitated by the floor plan rather than a product of ideological resistance, it serves as a spatial harbinger of the manner in which the performance often sidesteps what theatre semiotician Keir Elam describes as “the tyranny of architectonic grandeur and its aesthetic and ideological implications.”<sup>109</sup> Initial perceptions of the Daryl Roth construct a sense of place based upon the surface image of discipline and authority, a spatio-ideological formation which the performance de(con)structs in and through its carnivalesque spatial praxis. If only symbolically, De La Guarda shows what it might mean to transgress or transcend “the

tyranny of architectonic grandeur.” As my investigation spirals outward, the more or less overt symbolic and historical meanings of the Daryl Roth disperse into the myriad signs of multinational corporatism that proliferate Union Square. Thus, in moving from the confines of the theatre building to the immediate social surroundings, how might *Villa Villa* repeat its radical sideways move in a public place where commodification reigns?

In the society of the spectacle theorized and reviled by Guy Debord, “social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities.”<sup>110</sup> As societies become increasingly entwined with ideologies of commerce and consumption, public spaces take on an interpellant function: advertisements shout from buildings, park benches, roads and plazas in an effort to seduce human subjects into the cycle of reproduction. In turn, as public spaces become advertising spaces, the multinationals gain more control over the daily interactions that occur in such locales, constructing desires and realities in benefic accordance with sales numbers and profit margins. A brief look at the signs both literal and semiotic confirms that Union Square is no exception. The following description does not include all of the square, but rather those signs of late capitalist materialism that assault the prospective theatregoer’s field of vision as s/he makes her way through the marketplace to the Daryl Roth.

On the eastern side of the square, numerous signs emerge from the architecture almost instantaneously, the most notable being a gigantic digital clock accompanied by a postmodern ornamental art piece (it looks like a giant silver target splattered against the front of the building) positioned just above the Virgin Megastore. One side of the clock keeps the current time in hours/minutes/seconds while the other counts down to



midnight; the center placeholders provide a transitional space of tenths and hundredths of seconds, where count-forward becomes count-down and *vice versa*. From the enigmatic clock and splattered target, focus shifts to the sizable neon signs of the Virgin and its neighbor, Circuit City. Even from across the street, one can recognize the larger-than-life faces and figures of pop superstars, all advertising their newest release, on posters mounted in the music conglomerate's windows. On the adjacent corner, a Starbucks joins HSBC (an international holdings company based in London) in a massive building development that occupies the entire block. Three soaring towers rise from this complex, their polyhedral crowns trimmed with neon—one blue, one green, the other orange—dominating the skyline of the square. Toys 'R' Us inhabits the facade next to the theatre, a virtual playground where stuffed toys peer vacantly through the paned-glass windows. Next door to the Daryl Roth is the DR2, the stodgy old bank-turned-theatre's younger, trendier, more fashionable sibling whose glitzy silver façade reeks of postmodernity. Everything situated in a neatly structured grid, every storefront hailing passersby, converting public space into a site of potential transactions. A glut of neon logos, each of which claims a position in this ordered, rectilinear urban marketplace, surrounds us with the signs of multinational corporatism—a stark contrast with the ecstatic sensory dislocation of *Villa Villa*'s performance-dream. A semiotics of commodification dominates the “place-identity”<sup>111</sup> of Union Square. Do these beacons of commerce serve to reinforce and substantiate the ideology of capital within the performance space itself? On the other hand, might *Villa Villa* function as a carnivalesque haven, an impermanent sanctuary amid the surrounding commercial landscape?

In order to illuminate the paradoxical relationship between De La Guarda and this post-industrial phantasmagoria, I would like to first concentrate on the threshold rite which marks our entry into the performance space: a passage from exterior to interior, from the commercial reality constructed by Union Square to the performative reality constructed by *Villa Villa*, both of which are integral components in the formation of place.<sup>112</sup> Upon entering the Daryl Roth, spectators must descend a winding, dimly-lit staircase leading to the underground lobby/waiting area/bar. At the bottom of the stairwell is a narrow corridor; one cannot miss a massive action photo of De La Guarda bearing the phrase “Theatre that Falls from the Sky,” which occupies a large portion of one wall. “Bienvenidos,” scrawled in black letters above the archway, welcomes spectators into this preparatory zone.<sup>113</sup> Vibrant murals decorate the blue walls. (After scanning the walls intently, I would later discover that the artwork is by Billy. No surname, just “Billy.”) In spite of his ambiguous identity, Billy has painted unique bodies everywhere: a montage of brown, blue, yellow, white, peach faces sporting dreadlocks, mohawks (one flaunts green liberty spikes), shaved heads or afros; some are cyclopes with two nostrils, others have two eyes and a single nostril—all speak to youthful, countercultural identities. Soon, bodies fill the wooden benches that line three of the walls; the low hum of lobby-chatter consumes the space. The incongruous visual convergence of Billy’s super-human characters juxtaposed with the human subjects that comprise the audience seems perfectly at home. Down here, the signs bear little resemblance to the airbrushed, larger-than-life images of pop stars plastered on the Virgin Mega-storefront or the seemingly inexhaustible supply of stuffed animals peering with their mass-produced plastic eyes from the windows of the

Toys ‘R’ Us. Indeed, there are “archetypal resonances”<sup>114</sup> in our downward passage into the liminal-liminoid space: descending a staircase, navigating a corridor, moving from street-level into the bowels of the building, a transitional zone occupied by counter-cultural images of pluralism and difference, a sanctified womb set aside from the flow of everyday life. Conceptually and symbolically, this descent into the belly of the space produces a sense of estrangement, wonder, a sense of journeying into the unknown. Where the corporate logos of Starbucks, Virgin, etc. gain power through their capacity to be recognized immediately and across the globe, the ritual descent into the blue room serves to defamiliarize, presaging the experience of unmapped terrain: perhaps, in this *terra incognita* beneath the city, anything can happen.

Nevertheless, this is still a business; signs of commerce manifest in more or less subtle ways throughout the space. A chalkboard hangs on the wall behind the L-shaped bar: the upper half of this handwritten sales pitch lists the limited selection of beverages: Beer (Heineken, Sierra Nevada) and Wine (Merlot, Chardonnay) \$5; the bottom right corner markets T-shirts for \$20 while a small handwritten sign advertises the De La Guarda CD; a note card reading “Tip your divinely sexy bartender!” is attached to one of two metal baskets hanging above the elbow of the bar. In the rear of the space, a makeshift coat check—two card tables, three coat-racks and an unlabeled wicker basket for tips—charges \$4 per item. From T-shirts and CDs to overpriced beer, mercantilism leaks into the transitional space. Hence, it would be easy to read this pre-performance ritual as a reduplication of the capitalist system: after *purchasing* access, we move into the lobby-threshold to acquire overpriced souvenirs, which in turn leads us into a space where we receive the *product*, thus completing the cycle of exchange.

However, such a reading oversimplifies the process of performance and fails to account for the crucial influence of the preparatory rite. In fact, this initial period of separation and preparation serves as a gateway to those carnivalesque explosions which radicalize the perception of space and, consequently, place.

The manner in which *Villa Villa* spatializes the outside-in passage alters the conditions of exchange. A certain distance exists between the box office, the site where money is exchanged, and the waiting area, the transitional zone where the neon-trimmed HSBC towers, the otherworldly glow of Circuit City and all the rest cannot enter the field of perception. Physically and spatially, we are isolated, separated, inhabiting a crease in the signifying grid of Union Square, quite literally aside from and underneath the phantasmagoria. In leaving the surface, audience-initiands enter (both mentally and bodily) a more intimate space that is at once a part of and distanced from the aboveground marketplace. Of course, this initiation does not entail a permanent change of status, but rather a kind of indoctrination into a different marketplace altogether—a carnivalesque mode of spatial and economic interaction. Hence, small homemade advertisements replace large factory-made publicity; interpersonal promotion supplants slick global marketing campaigns; little spaces for gratuity (the baskets of the bartender and coat check attendants) accompany each site of transaction; people drink wine from plastic cups. Although it would be naïve to suggest that De La Guarda is not out to make money, we must also realize that the company does not churn out overpriced lattes on every other street corner. Rather, this is a space of localized, informal transactions: in carnivalesque fashion, the threshold offers its *own system of exchange*.

Thus, to the extent that carnival discourse is set aside from daily existence, this threshold rite fractures our relationship with the outside world, re-placing us in another, festive reality where the conventions and consequences of quotidian life do not readily apply. In line with Bakhtin, Victor Turner describes the sense of placelessness and timelessness—or rather, the suspension of normal placial and temporal meanings—peculiar to the carnival: “Truly, carnival is the denizen of a place which is no place, and a time which is no time, even where that place is a city’s main plazas, and that time can be found on an ecclesiastical calendar.”<sup>115</sup> Here, Turner reveals an important paradox: no performance, carnival or otherwise, can totally sever the outside-inside connection, for the “city’s main plazas” are always implicated in the performance itself. In fact, to sever the relationship completely would impede the radical process, for it is in the *negotiation* between interior and exterior, in the carnivalization of ideologically circumscribed locales, that *Villa Villa*’s placial politics manifest. In other words, if the spatial praxis of the performance is going to be efficacious, traces of the dominant must remain. This is why the threshold rite becomes crucial: as the buffer zone between the carnival and the conglomerates, it destabilizes the sense of place generated by the world outside and, in doing so, prepares the spectator for a radical transformation of the placial praxis s/he left behind.

Exiting some-place to enter another, inevitably a comparison emerges. In this case, recognizing the gap (perhaps only viscerally, emotionally, unconsciously) between the two senses of place creates an altogether new placial existence inflected by De La Guarda’s carnivalesque explosions. Located in the guts of an edifice which functions as an architectural-historical reminder of state power, in the midst of a

corporatist landscape where all the signs are telling us to buy, *Villa Villa* has the potential to insert its festive code of conduct into the place-identity of its context. Billy's artwork and the alien shadow imagery of "Papel" defamiliarize the world of commodities that the multinationals seek to naturalize, to entwine with our daily existence. The intimate, deep exchanges of the playful microperformances pushes us to associate openly with other human beings, to actually communicate with one another even when words prove unnecessary—here, it is not about what you can give me or what I can buy from you, but rather what we can give to each other. Throughout the performance, play becomes the dominant mode of exchange: soggy embraces, kisses and belly-raspberries usurp the handshake as the preferred greeting; children—and I am not sure that I am talking about the young in years—may throw paper and play with toys unimpeded by the disciplinary mechanisms of the classroom or the cubicle. Of course, De La Guarda like all theatre and performance has the potential to become a fetishized commodity, another piece of massified McArt in the global cultural marketplace; however, in the process of democratizing the space the line between production and consumption becomes blurred—she who creates the spectacle also receives it. Power is displaced and disseminated amongst performers, audience and crewmembers in a rhizomatic world that is at once pure fantasy, imagination and phenomenologically, materially present. The performance-dream comes to life. Flight becomes possible. Place is transformed.

### **Epilogue(?): Re-launching the De La Guarda Flying Machine**

To spiral outward once again would take us to the streets of Gotham and, ultimately, to

De La Guarda's place-ment in the socioeconomic, political, cultural and interpersonal networks of the global village. Where does *Villa Villa* fit in the placial context of the late capitalist metropolis? Can a theatrical performance insert its radical spatial praxis into such large-scale systems of ideological interpellation and control? Might such carnivalesque explosions offer a mode of exchange that undermines the disciplinary mechanisms at work in the global theatre marketplace? How does the New York installation differ from installations in Buenos Aires, Mexico, D. F., Seoul or Las Vegas? In order to parse such questions, we must launch the flying machine once again, traversing oceans and continents and cultures, expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the necessarily limited time-space of the Daryl Roth and Union Square.

. . . however, my line of flight ends here. I call it an epilogue because this particular journey is drawing to a close; and yet, in the spirit of *Villa Villa* I have no answers, no neat and tidy summation of what the performance is all about. While I rehash the major points of antecedent sections, there is no conclusion here. All I can offer is a log of where we've been and a provisional itinerary of where the next trajectory might lead. Coda and overture played simultaneously. Concomitant opening and closing remarks. A beginning as an end. Gazing outward from the unstable ground of the last eighteen-thousand words, I tender the following p/review.

Earlier, I discussed the myriad ways in which *Villa Villa* disrupts the disciplinary mechanisms of conventional theatre auditoria as well as the ideology of officialdom inscribed on its own architectural container—what changes when the performance moves to the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, one of the most prestigious venues in all of Argentina?<sup>116</sup> To De La Guarda's multi-million dollar

theatre at the Rio Casino Resort Hotel? I examined how the environmental spectacle of rhizomatic worldmaking produces a radical disjuncture in naturalized versions of the real, introducing another mode of experiencing a space of potentialities, a rehearsal for the possible. Yet, does this festive second world do the same in the illusory urban vistas of Las Vegas, the global headquarters of the society of the spectacle, the nonpareil of simulation? What about Mexico, D. F., where “the nature and scale of its urban problems border on science fiction?”<sup>117</sup> I suggested that *Villa Villa*’s ambivalent form of deep play disquiets the passive consumer—do these microperformances and sensory assaults remain within the ludic meta-frame in Seoul?<sup>118</sup> in Amsterdam? in Tokyo? Coming full circle: the final section launched this journey from performance space to social space, moving inside-out to examine how De La Guarda might successfully re-imagine the sense of place created by its immediate context. As I posited, *Villa Villa* transforms the placial dynamic generated by the architectonics of order inscribed on the Daryl Roth and the corporatist urban landscape of Union Square. How might these carnivalesque placial trans/formations affect the larger context of a “global city” such as New York,<sup>119</sup> a meeting place for the floating superstructures of transnational corporatism and exchange? Does the influence of the performance-dream dissipate in the postindustrial sprawl of the cityscape? How far does the flying machine reach?

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 20 February 2003. Daryl Roth Theatre. New York City . . . as if a liquid border suddenly opened between dream and performance—spiraling further into the stratosphere, the ceiling of a bank-turned-theatre becomes sky. Beyond the neon-trimmed towers, the spectacle of the Manhattan cityscape unfolds: a perfect grid of steel



and concrete and memories and shoes. On Broadway, thousands of yellow car horn taxicabs in parade formation beneath brought-to-you-by-Disney and enjoy the show. Twenty million soles navigate the maze, disappearing and reappearing as the flying machine spins out of control. The Met. The MOMA. The Bull Moose and a mnemonic conjunction. A sixty-fourth floor elevator to Central Park. Wonderland with Strawberry Fields and the Zoo and all the rest. Inside the vortex, a juxtaposition of sites/sights: Empire State becoming Grand Central becoming Madison Square Garden becoming Starbucks becoming Starbucks becoming Starbucks becoming Starbucks becoming Greenmarket becoming Chelsea becoming Harlem becoming Wall Street becoming park bench becoming Daryl Roth becoming Ground Zero becoming yesterday and tomorrow becoming sunset . . . a city-place destabilized and rearranged, an urban vista of bodies and buildings and realities interfacing in a single dream-performance. Upward. Metropolis machine becomes flying machine becomes body machine. Downward. The skyline melds into a perceptual blur, dislocating the spatial topographies of the mind. A synaesthetics of the real. Everywhere and nowhere at once. Here, soaring through the heavens of a world-turned-interstice, gravity falls away in the ecstasy of the occasion, as if a reverberant laughter suddenly erupted between freedom and flight. Returning to Nietzsche: "How could a human being who had had such dream experiences fail to desire happiness differently?"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Program notes, *De La Guarda*, Daryl Roth Theatre (20 February 2003), 6.

<sup>3</sup> In a portion of her dissertation which deals with *De La Guarda*, Maria Victoria Ruetalo identifies the implications of these spectatorial flights: “Later on in the spectacle a few fortunate members of the audience are chosen to be strapped into harnesses, and ‘fly’ with the performers, consequently experiencing a further breakdown of the stage-audience dichotomy by securing an aerial view of those below and literally becoming a part of the spectacle” (“Imaging the Apocalypse: Dystopian Representation in Post Dictatorship Argentina and Uruguay” [Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 2002], 186).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 76.

<sup>5</sup> From the liner notes of the compact disc, *De La Guarda*, *Villa Villa* (2001).

<sup>6</sup> John Vidal, “Like No Show on Earth,” *Guardian* (London), 4 June 1997, T12.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dominguez, “Flying Circus,” *Daily News* (New York), 16 August 1998, Sunday Extra, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Here, I am using the term *praxis* to denote the implementation or effectuation of a previously formulated (i.e. rehearsed) idea. In other words, where *practice* signifies an act as it occurs in more or less quotidian circumstances, *praxis* points to the systematization of theoretical, philosophical and/or political concerns that impel the act in preconceived contexts (i.e. the theatre).

<sup>9</sup> See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Cultures,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30. By methodological necessity, my use of “thick description” does not run as deeply as Geertz’s hermeneutic, for I cannot get inside the minds and bodies of other audience members without personal interviews or extensive surveys, psychological and psychoanalytic research, etc. However, I do “thickly describe” to the extent that I do not merely examine the surface of the performance (i.e. the actions and images created by the actors, sights and sounds created by the technical apparatus, etc.), but rather look at the microscopic behavioral signs of children and seniors, businesspeople and alternates, crewmembers, climbers, performers and myself as they occur within this space. Truth be told, I believe that any attempt to interpret *Villa Villa* must “thickly describe,” for the manipulation of the performance space is continually breaking down distinctions between micro and macro, transforming the environment into a disjointed series of localized, individuated events.

<sup>10</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8.

<sup>11</sup> The experiments which led directly to *Período Villa Villa* started in 1993 without public funding and with scant resources. Four years prior, Carlos Saúl Menem won the presidential election over Raúl Alfonsín, inheriting among other things one of the worst economic crises in Argentine history. In the years following the Dirty War, Alfonsín's poor decisions had already sent the economy into a disastrous tailspin; however, in 1989, the year of Menem's election, inflation rose above two-hundred percent and the value of the Argentine currency dropped from 1 *austral* = \$1US to 1000 *austral* = \$1US (David J. Keeling, *Buenos Aires: Global Dreams, Local Crises* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996], 134). As the national debt and unemployment climbed, millions could barely earn a living wage. Riots erupted as "groups of desperate people assaulted stores and supermarkets, and the repression of the protesters left a number of dead" (Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, trans. James P. Brennan [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002], 285). Over one million were forced to the *villas de emergencias*, the self-made shantytowns for which De La Guarda's *Período Villa Villa* is named. In Argentina, to create something "villa villa" is, so to speak, to make do with what you've got—to transcend the economic reality of the situation. Hence, as Ruetalo states, "the title of the show, 'Villa, Villa,' therefore reflects not the theme or content of the performance, but its production history" ("Imaging the Apocalypse," 175). Ruetalo elaborates on *Villa Villa*'s penurious origins: "The performance developed under a dire economic situation, which was aesthetically maintained through thrift-store attire of the performers and the unpretentious staging" (ibid.).

*Villa Villa*'s genesis (as it is performed to the ticket-buying audience, at any rate) is worth quoting in full: "In 1993 we started testing our ideas in a music club. Before the concert each night, *De La Guarda* would stage an impromptu rehearsal. This experimental period was full of freedom. We could test the audience reaction and find the spirit of the show we wanted to develop. The live rehearsals were the best way to create the show because the audience was so completely involved. We decided to self-produce the show. Reality set in: we had no money. The solution was to participate in festivals and events. This offered us the money and materials which let us continue to further test and develop our ideas" (Program notes, 5).

<sup>12</sup> The performance opened in Buenos Aires 1 September 1995 (Program notes, 5), performing in a "temporary tent" behind the prestigious Centro Cultural Recoleta in the upper-class district of Buenos Aires (Ruetalo, 176). After touring the international festival circuit for three years, De La Guarda was "discovered" in Montreal and moved there to the Daryl Roth in 1998 by the producers of *Rent*. The company returned to Buenos Aires in 2001, this time performing inside the main hall of the prestigious Centro Cultural Recoleta, a testament to their popular and commercial success. The return to Buenos Aires marks *Villa Villa*'s line of flight from impoverished beginnings

to its current transnational (economic and popular) “success.” When Alan Zarembo of *Newsweek* recently asked Baldinu about the troupe’s homecoming, Baldinu replied: “[Argentina] was in the middle of the crisis. But we decided to do it anyway. When you have a society with no good news, people discover little places where they can feel some love and some fun, explode and express themselves. ‘De la Guarda’ was one of those places” (Zarembo, “Economics of Acrobatics,” *Newsweek*, 27 May 2002, 7). What Baldinu does not mention, however, is that in the midst of the absolute disintegration of the Argentine economy, in the midst of a pantheon of corrupt politicians and bankers, in the midst of a society whose shantytowns—*Villa Villa*’s namesakes—are growing at an alarming rate, De La Guarda charged a ticket price equivalent to that of its off-Broadway manifestation. Although I leave this line of flight for another investigation, there is certainly a paradox at work in the connection between the commercial theatre apparatus and the manner in which it affects the source culture. Again, there is great potential for future inquiries.

<sup>13</sup> For a more in-depth look at how De La Guarda relates to its Argentine context, see Ruetalo, 174-94.

<sup>14</sup> Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>15</sup> During the Dirty War, public spaces were occupied by men with guns, the crimes committed against the disappeared transcribed on/in the bodies of the living. From the educational system through avenues of cultural production in Buenos Aires and elsewhere, the junta attempted to homogenize identity, to suppress and eliminate difference, to “reorganize” society according to its neofascist vision. At the same time, the people were atomized, isolated, relegated to their homes as fear and danger often kept them from gathering in plazas, markets, entertainment districts, etc. Although the junta fell from power after their loss to Britain in the Falklands War, their legacy of terror continued to shape the social and political reality of Argentinean culture.

<sup>16</sup> Without eliding them, Randy Martin distinguishes between coercive and consensual modes of discipline: “In those countries where coercion prevails, control is focused in the state itself as an institutionalized monopoly of force. . . . The bodies of the torturers and the tortured remain in brutal conflict. The flesh of the imported and the indigenous warrior brush and chafe. Where consent reigns, institutionalized force is nonetheless present, albeit peripheral . . . . Social control shows another side, less violent perhaps, but equally effacing. The legions of order do not brandish weapons but bring gifts. The torture chamber dissolves into the shopping mall. . . . Rather than being centered upon institutions identified as the state, control is diffused through culture” (Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* [New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990], 3-4). While the embodied sense of place present in the original is, for the most part, lost in transl(oc)ation, the performance retains the potential to create a radically new sense of place in the urban cityscape of Manhattan.

<sup>17</sup> Victoria Young, "Defying Urban Ennui, and Gravity," *New York Times*, 2 July 1998, E8.

<sup>18</sup> As part of this experimental movement, Baldinu, Diqui and Tomas James, Kerpel, and D'Aquila created La Organización Negra (The Black Organization). Performing in the streets of Buenos Aires, the group responded to the pervading sense of alienation with site-specific performances designed to surprise incidental audiences: "We worked on the streets because it was the only way to surprise a public without generating theatrical or performative expectations, obviously with no warning whatsoever" (Germán de Souza, "De La Guarda: Historia" [accessed 20 Sept 2000], <<http://www.lanewton.com.ar/dlg.htm>>; quoted in and trans. Ruetalo, 174-5).

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Davis, "The Theater of Danger," *Art in America* 87, no. 2 (1999): 61.

<sup>20</sup> The titles of various newspaper reviews elucidate the tendency to place *Villa Villa* in the field of "extreme" culture: "Theater as Juice, Dream and Cattle Prod," "The Circus: Lithe and Extremely Dangerous," "'Período' is a Thrill Ride: Audience Beware, South American Rock Theatre Not for Wallflowers," "Who Needs a Safety Net?," "Anarchy Rains" (Peter Applebome, *New York Times*, 30 July 1998, B1, B5; Peter Conrad, *Observer* [London], 1 June 1997, 9; Pat Donnelly, *Gazette* [Montreal], 5 June 1997, C11; Rachel Halliburton, *Independent* [London], 20 May 1999, 10; Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times* [London], 21 June 1997, 8).

<sup>21</sup> Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 80-2.

<sup>22</sup> See Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, rev. ed (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001); Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: a history* (New York: Routledge, 2000); *Peter Brook: A Theatrical Casebook*, compiled by David Williams, with a foreword by Irving Wardle (New York: Methuen, 1988); John Tytell, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile and Outrage* (New York: Methuen, 1997); Sharon G. Feldman, "Scenes from the Contemporary Barcelona Stage: La Fura dels Baus's Aspiration to the Authentic," *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 4 (1998): 447-472.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Schechner describes such "creases" as "liminal, in between. They run through the actual and conceptual centers of society, like faults in the Earth's crust. Creases are places to hide, but more importantly they signal areas of instability, disturbance, and potentially radical changes in the social topography" ("Toward a Poetics of Performance," in *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. [New York: Routledge, 1988], 164).

<sup>24</sup> Josep Puy i Curiel, "Compañia de Teatro: La Fura dels Baus," Portal Barcelona (accessed 4 Feb 2004), <<http://www.barceloca.com/data/details.aspx?ID=4850>>. For

more information on La Fura, see Feldman, “Scenes from the Contemporary Barcelona Stage” and the company’s official website, [www.lafura.com](http://www.lafura.com).

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bordieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. and intro. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> At this point, the discerning reader may wonder why I have not chosen to analyze the economics of the De La Guarda flying machine. After all, this company (in both senses, the business and theatrical) makes a great deal of money with its carnivalesque explosions and \$55 ticket price. Indeed, at first glance *Villa Villa* appears to reinforce the commodification that I am arguing it resists or transcends. However, I do not deal directly with this problematic because I am more concerned with the embodied encounter between performers, spectators and space. “Still,” the reader points out, “such encounters always already occur within a set of economic relations.” Exactly. In fact, I believe that De La Guarda’s implication in the hege(de)monic system of late capitalist exchange is one of the factors that contributes to the radicalization of the performance space, for the company navigates and benefits from the system even as they work to subvert it.

Put another way, *Villa Villa* introduces its carnivalesque spatial praxis into a context dominated by ideological mechanisms of dispossession. This is the main thrust of my inquiry. Hence, for these purposes, the fact that De La Guarda profits from its position in the cultural field does not lessen the impact of the *spatial praxis itself*. While an in-depth study of *Villa Villa*’s economics—including but not limited to the monetary gain secured by the company and the producers—would be invaluable, that is another line of flight, to be taken up at another time.

<sup>27</sup> Keir Elam uses the term “sociofugality” to describe the divisive spatial praxis of conventional modern theatre spaces. According to Elam, such spaces tend to produce a kind of individualistic, anti-communitarian experience: “More formal modern theatres tend...toward sociofugality: even though necessarily contained within the architectural unit of the auditorium, and thus in theory surrendering his individual function, the spectator has his own well-marked private space, individual seat, and relative immunity from physical contact with his fellows (and even from seeing them). The result is to emphasize personal rather than social perception and response, to introduce a form of ‘privacy’ within an experience which is collective in origin” (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* [New York and London: Methuen, 1980], 64).

<sup>28</sup> Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

- <sup>31</sup> Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 190.
- <sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and intro. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.
- <sup>33</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 149-50.
- <sup>34</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 41.
- <sup>35</sup> Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), xi.
- <sup>36</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 2.
- <sup>37</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 4.
- <sup>38</sup> See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, intro. Solon T. Kimball (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 21.
- <sup>39</sup> Reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss was one of the first to outline how “horizons of expectations” affect the text-receiver relationship. According to Marvin Carlson, “Jauss’s insistence on the open-endedness of the text, its concretization the production of a varying dialectic between the work’s ‘horizon of expectations’ and the varying ‘horizon of expectations’ of the reader” (Jauss, *Aesthetische Erfahrung und literarisch Hermeneutik* [Munich, 1977], 18; quoted in and trans. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present*, rev. ed. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], 519).
- <sup>40</sup> Robert Knopf, review of *Villa Villa*, *Theatre Journal* 51, no. 4 (1999): 457.
- <sup>41</sup> Richards, “Orgiastic Ease,” C1.
- <sup>42</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Verso, 1958), 79.
- <sup>43</sup> Knopf, review of *Villa Villa*, 457.

<sup>44</sup> Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 271.

<sup>45</sup> “Papel,” according to Ruetalo, “functions as a three-way metaphor for the group’s multi-layered dismantling of spatial boundaries. The first metaphor involves the transnational reach of the show itself . . . . Secondly, the multi-disciplinary performance of *Período Villa, Villa* . . . defies the conventional limits of theater as a genre. . . . Thirdly, the opening of *Período Villa, Villa* refers to the undoing of the circumscribed matrix of the body” (177-8). While I agree with Ruetalo in that “Papel” presages something larger and undermines theatrical convention, I believe she overstates or at least reaches to find the metaphorical implications and ignores the practical consequences of this opening sequence. In my view, “Papel” acts as a kind of spatial précis for the rest of the performance, previewing the strategies that the company will use over the course of the next sixty minutes. As the paper curtain falls, it is not the geographic boundaries between nation-states that dissolve, but rather the boundaries between illusion and actuality, dream and performance.

<sup>46</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 255.

<sup>47</sup> Richards, “Orgiastic Ease,” C1.

<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 255.

<sup>49</sup> See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 47-8.

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 10.

<sup>51</sup> De La Guarda makes \$20 tickets available to twenty spectators prior to each performance. I waited in line for these tickets on Saturday afternoon, arriving at the theatre about four hours early. Interestingly, many of those who stood in the cold, damp New York air began to form a kind of community around the ordeal of waiting, sharing a certain “insider” status due to the knowledge that we were circumventing the normal process of exchange. The fact that *Villa Villa* makes a space for such a sideways move is not in itself radical, but does point to one of the many purposeful (loop)holes in the system that complicates the performance-consumer contract.

<sup>52</sup> Philip Auslander offers the following definition of presence: “In theatrical parlance, *presence* usually refers either to the relationship between actor and audience—the actor as manifestation before an audience—or, more specifically, to the actor’s psychophysical attractiveness to the audience, a concept related to that of *charisma*” (*Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in*



*Contemporary American Performance* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992], 37).

<sup>53</sup> The term “bodied spaces” appears in the title of Stanton B. Garner, Jr.’s book, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). In his introduction, Garner explicates some of the implications of the term: “Theatrical space is ‘bodied’ in the sense of being comprised of bodies positioned within a perceptual field, but it is also ‘bodied’ in the more fundamental sense of ‘bodied forth,’ oriented in terms of a body that exists not just as the object of perception, but as its originating site, its zero-point. To stage this body in space before the witness of other bodies is to engage the complex positionality of theatrical watching” (4). However, I am speaking of a space which has neither a “zero-point” nor a site of origination, but rather is already involved in a process of becoming. The difference here is architectural: Garner builds his study around the maintenance of actor-audience delineation—“distanced seeing”—whereas De La Guarda immerses the audience in the same haptic process of becoming as that of the actors. Positionality is thus relative rather than defined.

<sup>54</sup> As Bakhtin states: “In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (*Rabelais*, 7).

<sup>55</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), 104.

<sup>56</sup> Ruetalo, 186.

<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 163.

<sup>58</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-5, 167-206.

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. and intro. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 249-50.

<sup>61</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 154.

<sup>62</sup> Garner, *Bodied Spaces*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>66</sup> See Schechner, "Selective Inattention," in *Performance Theory*, 190-3.

<sup>67</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 200.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 195-6.

<sup>70</sup> According to Richard Schechner, a "transportation" occurs when the performer enters the extra-ordinary world of performance and returns to the world of everyday life more or less at the same point where s/he left. See Schechner, "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed," in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, fore. Victor Turner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 20, 125-7.

<sup>71</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 153-4.

<sup>72</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Verso, 1958), 27.

<sup>73</sup> Williamson, "Airborne in the Rainforest," features; Hemming, "Anarchy Rains," *Arts*, 8; Conrad, "The Circus," 9.

<sup>74</sup> Richards, "Orgiastic Ease," C1.

<sup>75</sup> Bert States quotes fellow phenomenologist Max Scheler on the idea of *self-givenness*: "something can be *self-given* only if it is no longer given merely through any sort of symbol; in other words, only if it is not 'meant' as the mere 'fulfillment' of a sign which is previously defined in some way or other. In this sense, *phenomenological philosophy* is a continual *desymbolization of the world*" (Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David R. Lachterman [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973], 143; quoted in States, *Great Reckonings*, 23).

<sup>76</sup> See Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 82-4.

<sup>77</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 493.

<sup>78</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 30-1.

<sup>79</sup> Baz Kershaw, "Curiosity or Contempt: On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism" *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 4 (2003): 610.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 599.

<sup>81</sup> Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 141.

<sup>82</sup> See Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 432.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 448. In a complementary argument, Richard Schechner believes that “*audience participation takes place precisely at the point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event;*” according to Schechner, something must be at stake in order for participation to occur (*Environmental Theater*, rev. ed. [New York: Applause, 1994], 40; cf. 40-86).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>85</sup> Feature story on De La Guarda, *Newsstand*, broadcast 3 December 1998 (22:00 EST) by CNN, written by Judd Rose, Robin Groth, Peter Bonventure, Maggie Murphy, Ken Tucker, transcript no. 98120300V02.

<sup>86</sup> Artaud, *Theater and Its Double*, 92.

<sup>87</sup> James Rampton, “Everything but a Plot,” *Independent* (London), 18 June 1997, 4 (emphasis mine).

<sup>88</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “Circus Jerks Run Amok in Argentine ‘Villa Villa,’” *Daily News* (New York), 17 June 1998, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004), 122. The metacommunication “This is play” can be fleshed out to read: ““These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote”” (122).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> From the above examples, it appears that people who would rather observe (or leave) than participate essentially have no choice, that *Villa Villa* contradictorily grants agency only to those who agree to partake. However, a scene that I observed on Friday night demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case. At one of the most interactive points in the spectacle, when the chaotic energy of the moment seemed on the verge of taking over the space completely, I glanced over my right shoulder to find a group of four elderly patrons sitting on a bench beneath the scaffolding. I separated myself from the bedlam and moved closer. Two of them appeared to be enjoying themselves: one man tapped his right foot while the woman sitting next to him flashed a wide grin even

as she placed a hand over her right ear to dampen the loud music. The others appeared less interested than their companions, but did not seem detached. Regretfully, the scene ended before I could converse with the group and I can only assume that they left the space before I did (or moved from the bench after the chaos subsided), for they were gone when I made my exit after the curtain call. Nevertheless, the sight serves as a testament to the integrative possibilities of the performance space, which allows even those who do not actively participate to remain part of the ecology, absorbed in the atmosphere despite their choice to stay on the fringe.

<sup>92</sup> Program notes, 4-5 (emphasis mine).

<sup>93</sup> Baldinu: “We don’t want to frighten people . . . . We are not there to provoke;” in Vidal, “Like No Show on Earth,” T12.

<sup>94</sup> See Ruetalo, 178, 182-6.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance,” in *Performance Theory*, 83.

<sup>96</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 165.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 164-5.

<sup>98</sup> Geertz, “Deep Play,” 444.

<sup>99</sup> Marco de Marinis, “Dramaturgy of the Spectator.” *TDR* 31, no. 2 (1987): 104.

<sup>100</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7.

<sup>101</sup> de Marinis, “Dramaturgy of the Spectator,” 104; see also Umberto Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance” *TDR* 21, no. 1 (1977): 107-12; and Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979).

<sup>102</sup> Kershaw, “Curiosity or Contempt,” 610.

<sup>103</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space,” *TDR* 41, no. 3 (1997): 12-13.

<sup>104</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xvi-xvii.

<sup>105</sup> Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,” in *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 26-7.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Hays, *The Public and Performance: Essays in the History of French and German Theatre 1871-1900* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 3; quoted in Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 137.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Gelernter, *A History of American Architecture: Buildings in Their Cultural and Technological Context* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 108.

<sup>108</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 45.

<sup>109</sup> Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 63-4.

<sup>110</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 29.

<sup>111</sup> David Harvey, "Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition," in *The Global Transformations Reader*, eds. David Held and Anthony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 89.

<sup>112</sup> In his classic study, Arnold van Gennep discusses *rites of territorial passage*, in which the subject passes from one space to another, essentially leaving one world and entering another: "It will be noted that rites carried out on the threshold itself are transition rites. [. . .] The rites of the threshold are therefore not 'union' ceremonies, properly speaking, but rites of preparation for union, themselves preceded by rites of preparation for the transitional [i.e. liminal] stage" (*The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, intro. Solon T. Kimball [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], 20-1). In *Villa Villa*, this preparation includes passing through Union Square, obtaining a ticket in the upper lobby, descending to the lower lobby and finally ascending the short staircase to the performance space where the audience waits in semi-darkness for the performance to begin.

<sup>113</sup> Along with the name of the company, this Spanish salutation is one of the last remaining vestiges of Argentine-ness that manifests in the space itself.

<sup>114</sup> Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 201.

<sup>115</sup> Victor Turner, "Carnaval in Rio: Dionysian Drama in an Industrializing Society," in *The Anthropology of Performance*, preface by Richard Schechner (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 123.

<sup>116</sup> See Maria Laura Guembe, "Nuevas tendencias en el campo teatral," Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires (accessed 29 May 2003), <[www.fsoc.uba.ar/invest/eventos/cultura4/mesa5/5guembe.doc](http://www.fsoc.uba.ar/invest/eventos/cultura4/mesa5/5guembe.doc)>.

<sup>117</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “The Streets: Where Do They Reach?” in *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena*, eds. Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (Gardiner, NY: Critical Press, 1998), 73.

<sup>118</sup> Even before *Villa Villa* made it to Seoul, the press hailed the performance as a new frontier in the use of theatrical space: “In ‘De La Guarda,’ there is no separation of the audience section and the performing stage. The entire theater hall becomes the performing stage, including the audience section. This *revolutionary performance that broke the conventional concept of the stage* and takes place above the spectators will meet the Korean audience this summer” (Bae Eun-joo, “Flying Circus Show ‘De La Guarda’ Dazzling Treat for Seoul Fans,” *Korea Herald*, 1 May 2002, [emphasis mine]).

<sup>119</sup> See Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

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