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**“The Shifting Character of the Prague Quadrennial:
Politics and Performance on the Global Stage”**

Introduction: The Prague Quadrennial

Since its inception more than fifty years ago, the Prague Quadrennial of Scenography and Theatrical Space (hereafter the Quadrennial or PQ) has been the foremost global venue to showcase innovation in performance design and technology. In some ways, the PQ follows the model of international exhibitions for the visual arts, like the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Bienal, but the goal of the Quadrennial is unique; as

Czechoslovak scenographer Vladamír Jindra stated in his draft of the PQ statutes, “the Prague Quadrennial is guided by an attempt to capture the specific nature of stage art... stage design cannot be separated from the direction and all the other



components of dramatic art, and their synthetic character should be underlined.”¹ After a rather rocky start in the midst of the Cold War, the PQ has expanded dramatically. Fewer than two dozen nations took part in the initial 1967 Quadrennial. But as noted by its promotional materials, the 2019 PQ took place over eleven days—from June 6 through 16—and featured 79 countries and regions, 600 live actions, and 800 artists.²

Photo 1: Billboard for 2019 PQ

Crucially, however, such a rich panoply of exhibits and events are overdetermined by the international environment of the Quadrennial, the global context wherein artists and visitors interact with one another. Moreover, encounters within this international venue will inevitably prompt questions not only about the arts, but about politics as well; any such global gathering,

if not overtly political, always will be *politicized* by referencing the past, present, and especially future relations between its international participants. In this article, I will argue that the politicized quality of the PQ has been embedded in the institution since its foundation, and profoundly impacts the selection, production, and reception of everything showcased under its auspices. As such, we must consider the Quadrennial not only as an invaluable exhibition of international performance, but also as an index of the politicization of performance around the globe. First, however, I offer readers unfamiliar with the PQ a brief overview of my own experience at the 2019 Quadrennial: the rich artistic and academic range of this most recent PQ will provide an immediate context for the argument to follow.



When I attended the 2019 Quadrennial. I noted that it was, as always, anchored by its national design exhibits, themselves classified under two headings. On the one hand, there are the National Exhibits proper, typically sponsored either by a state ministry or a private arts NPO; on the other hand, there are the Student Exhibits from institutions of higher learning, likewise sponsored by participating nations. Representing the USA, the professional organization USITT curated both the National and Student Exhibits, each of which showcased, via touchscreens, works by several

highlight the diversity of stage design across the country. In fact, the program entry for the US National Exhibit allied this diversity to the genetics of the nation itself: “Between the individuals in the US with immigrant roots and those that can trace their ancestry to more than 500 Na-

dozen designers to

Photos 2 & 3: US National Exhibit: “# Dramatic Imagination”



Photos 4 & 5: US Student Exhibit: “Breaking Through Borders”



tive tribes, our rich cultural diversity—our cultural DNA—contributes to the creativity, ingenuity, and knowledge that we find inspiration and have abstracted as the regions of our vast



geography.”³ And the entry for the US Student Exhibit reinforced this link between genetics and artistic production: “Common humanity is embodied by the double helix shape of DNA—inspiration for the USA Student Exhibit. The swirl of human existence mirrors the excitement of the creative process, reaching out to an audience to see and experience someone else’s world and humanity, through the power of theatre.”⁴



To be sure, not all exhibitors were as committed to documenting specific production designs; many followed a longstanding tradition by taking a more conceptual approach

to their entries for the PQ. The Romanian National Exhibit, for instance, was a retrospective

Photo 6: Romanian National Exhibit: “Treasure Trove of a Great Stage Designer”

installation on the career of scenographer Dragos Buhagiar, “a poetic vestige of what continues to exist of his work in the

memory of the spectators of yesterday and which invites the spectators of today to recreate it in their imaginations.”⁵ And the Czech Student Exhibit approached the exploration of performance space by inviting visitors to a ticket kiosk—much like those seen in central Prague—

Photo 7: Czech Student Exhibit: “Prague is not Czechia”

and offering free trips to outlying villages for alternate perspectives on Czech culture; the aim of the exhibit, “based on the

performative actions of the participants, (was) to present scenography as various theatricalized settings.”⁶

In addition to exhibits, the PQ also featured a wealth of experimental performance events. Among the three-dozen entries in the *Formations* series, which investigated the movement of bodies through public spaces over time, I happened to catch *Deform*, “a performance with flexible sculpture

Photo 8::



Photo 9: “Material Interactions”

designed for a human body.”⁷ There were also live presentations from the twelve *Result-Driven Workshops*, in which participants met intensively with project leaders for the first week of the Quadrennial, then showcased the results of their efforts



on the evening of June 12. The *Material Interactions* workshop, for instance, proposed to “explore the possibilities evoked by notions of the Sublime and Grotesque through an expanded notion of costume.”⁸ Finally, I should mention the immersive “environment” called *The Blue Hour* that filled an unused Sports Arena adjacent to the main PQ exhibition site. There visitors could enjoy the shifting light- and soundscapes from overhead galleries, or enjoy an “enhanced” experience via VR goggles available in the circular sandboxes installed on the lower level.⁹

Yet the rich panoply of the PQ is always overdetermined by the international environment of the Quadrennial itself, the global context wherein artists and visitors interact with one another. Moreover, en-

Photo 10:: “The Blue Hour”



counters within this international venue inevitably prompt questions about the messy intersections of art and politics. To be sure, some classic theories of Western aesthetics have sought to distance the one from the other. Immanuel Kant argued that aesthetic evaluation requires a disinterested observer, for whom politics plays no role in the act of judgment. And G. W. F. Hegel maintained that the artwork is a manifestation of *Geist* or World-Spirit working its way

through the hands of the artist.¹⁰ But as a foundation for my own analysis of the PQ, I turn to the “Commitment” essay by Theodor Adorno, where he wrote that “even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise.’”¹¹ This is to say that even an artwork readily assimilable to a given political regime embeds an immanent critique of the regime itself. And in this sense, the Quadrennial is *politicized*, because it performs gestures toward alternate political possibilities, scenarios in which in which theatre and performance might forge new links between peoples, communities, and nations.

In the remainder of this essay, I explore how the politicization of the PQ has shifted from one historical moment to another. I begin with a brief overview of the early years of the Quadrennial, arguing that international politics have inflected the PQ from its beginnings. I then turn to my personal experiences at the last three Quadrennials, from 2011 to 2019, to offer concrete examples of how PQ engagements with both art and politics reflect changing circumstances on the global stage. The analyses of Quadrennial exhibits and events are my own, and therefore subjective, but I do hope they offer readers some useful insights into the PQ and its place in the international political scene.

The Early History of the Prague Quadrennial

The impetus for the founding of the Prague Quadrennial actually dated back to the 1930s, when Czechoslovak designers such as Vlastislav Hofman, František Tröster, and Jan Sládek won fame at international exhibitions in Milan and Paris. After the disruptions of the Second World War and the Socialist Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, Czechoslovak designers like Tröster and a young Josef Svoboda took top honors at the Belgium International Expo of 1958 and won numerous awards at the São Paulo Art Biennial from the late 1950s through the middle 1960s. This international acclaim led Czechoslovak scenographers to inaugurate the PQ in 1967, its statutes modeled after the São Paulo festival where they had achieved so much success.¹²

At the time of its founding, leaders of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, while maintaining their allegiance to the Warsaw Pact, were also embarking upon a series of major political and economic reforms that resulted in the Prague Spring of 1968 and the subsequent August Invasion by the Soviet Union and its allies to quash the movement they viewed as a threat to Soviet hegemony in the Eastern Bloc. The inaugural Quadrennial therefore opened within an already-charged political climate, as evidenced by its first participants and their exhibits. Only twenty-three nations took part in the 1967 PQ; in a show of solidarity among members of a strained alliance, every Warsaw Pact member except Hungary made an appearance. The United States did not attend the first Quadrennial, and in fact did not submit an exhibit until 1975.

Yet as Věra Ptáčková notes in her comprehensive study of the first seven Quadrennials, even at this early point the Eastern Bloc nations displayed a tension between “documentary” and “conceptual” approaches to their exhibits—a tension that also reflected differing political approaches to the theatre arts by the states in question. For instance, the doctrinaire government of East Germany seemed eager not only to rehabilitate but to lionize Brecht as their socialist hero by showcasing the stage designs of his disciple, Karl von Appen; indeed, von Appen won a gold medal for his scenography at this first PQ. Yet the government of Poland, comparatively lenient in its attitude toward the avant-garde, presented fragments of works by several designers, all organized around the common theme of death; as Ptáčková notes regarding the elements that tied these fragments together, “the ever-present plane of death was also sustained by the materials: deteriorating lace, faded silk, spiderwebs as the hair of the dead; this all formed the background or part of a vivid drawing.”¹³

The 1971 Quadrennial took place in the aftermath of the August Invasion and the dismantling of the Czechoslovak reform movement. While native Czechoslovak theatre troupes

were subject to heavy censorship, the newly-installed autocratic government welcomed international participation in the PQ—at least to some degree. Ptáčková pointedly remarks that “from the outside, the host country continued to welcome the international exhibits: the exhibition halls of the PQ remained unchanged; on the contrary, the world’s interest increased. The international exhibition suddenly became an excellent democratic mask reinforcing totalitarian relations.”¹⁴ Once again, the international politics of the 1971 Quadrennial are usefully illustrated by a glance at the Polish exhibit, specifically the presence / absence of materials from two renowned Polish directors: Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzi Grotowski. Kantor had offered samples of his work at the 1967 PQ, notably the automated stack of broken deck chairs from his production of *The Madman and the Nun* by Witkeiwicz. But Czechoslovak officials barred Kantor from the 1971 Quadrennial, likely because his fascination with “useless” or “destroyed” objects in his productions ran afoul of the orthodox materialism of his socialist censors. Yet the designs of Grotowski productions such as *The Constant Prince* were permitted exhibition at the 1971 PQ, despite their similarly avant-garde elements. To be sure, by 1971 Grotowski had already achieved international fame to a degree that Kantor would not enjoy until he premiered *The Dead Class* in 1976; it seems that Czechoslovak authorities simply could not banish such a prominent figure as Grotowski from the increasingly global arena of the PQ.

The 2011 Prague Quadrennial

In the twenty-first century, the Prague Quadrennial continues to shift with the prevailing political winds. When I attended the 2011 PQ, for instance, much of the world was still rankled by the impact of the recent global recession. But the program for the 2011 Quadrennial contained a welcome letter from Bohuslav Svoboda, the Mayor of Prague, that made a case for promotion of the arts in the midst of a global economic crisis:

Economics and related issues have recently dominated public space and public discussion in many countries, and not just the Czech Republic. All the more reason why I am so very glad that Prague can host – for the twelfth time now – this festival of contemporary world art. The Prague Quadrennial is a unique opportunity to show residents of and visitors to our city a broader view of the world than just that reflected by numbers and economic figures.¹⁵

This assurance from Svoboda—that art broadens our worldview and allows us to look past the economic tumult of the moment—somehow gibed with the admittedly enigmatic theme selected for the PQ as a whole: “At the still point of the turning world: vertical opera.” If I take the word “opera” in the original Italian sense to mean “work,” or “work of art,” then I understand that art serves as a stable axis for our swiftly-spinning globe.¹⁶

Photo 11: the *Průmyslový palác* in 2019; the west wing is still under repair.

That said, there was a significant development that de-stabilized this particular Quadrennial. For the first time in decades, the major exhibits of the PQ were not housed in the *Průmyslový palác* or Industrial Palace, an Art Nouveau structure built in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ In 2008 the Industrial Palace was severely damaged by fire—its west wing re-



Photo 12: the *Veletržní palác*, site of the 2011 PQ. Photo courtesy of Lauren Lowell.

mains replaced by a temporary structure to this day—so most exhibits for the 2011 Quadrennial were displayed in the *Veletržní palác*, or Trade Fair Palace. This stolid modernist structure, reminiscent of Bauhaus design, was completed in 1928—exactly ten years after World War I, when Czechoslovakia became an independent nation; and ten years before Nazi Germany annexed large portions of the country as a prelude to World War II. But it was also just one year before the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the on-



set of the Great Depression, which certainly threw the economic crisis of the 2000s into sharper relief. The architecture of the building, with its focus on function as well as form, recalled an earlier egalitarian ethos that eschewed wealth as a badge of admission and offered access to all.

As a sort of counterpoint to the economic considerations of the moment, I was especially drawn to an exhibit entitled *Extreme Costume*, which included designs by thirty designers from nineteen countries and regions. The 2011 PQ Program stated that “this project creates space for costume projects to be taken out of their original context of performance in order to be looked at ‘close up’ as autonomous art with individual quality.” And curator of the exhibit Simona Rybáková added that “We were interested in freezing time in order to draw the visitors attention to detail, form and experience that theatregoers often miss or that pass by too quickly during the action on stage.”¹⁸ Yet the idea that a costume might be wrenched from the immediate context of its “theatrical” value does not suggest that it is easily divorced from its economic value—famous examples of “autonomous artworks” now grace the major museums of the world, as any stroll through a gallery of Dada art will instantly reveal. And so the exhibition of these costumes as “autonomous art” offered a curious juxtaposition to the realities of recession in 2011, in which discussions of value were cast—despite the letter from the Mayor of Prague—first and foremost in economic terms.

Photo 13: “Extreme Costume”
Photo courtesy of Tom Burch.

The 2015 Prague Quadrennial

Like their predecessors in 2011, the organizers of the 2015 PQ also had to contend with the fact that the *Průmyslový palác*, the traditional home of the Quadrennial, remained unavailable for use. Yet rather than relocating most exhibits to a single alternative space, the organizers instead opted to host the PQ at multiple sites through-



out the city, many of them within the historic districts of central Prague itself. Certainly their decision impacted the overall tenor and takeaways of this particular PQ. The editors of the 2016 issue of the journal *Theatre and Performance Design* dedicated to the Quadrennial noted that “for 11 days, PQ produced an imagined shared space of people invested in different kinds of performing and visual arts that plugged-into the multi-layered, unstable identity of the city....”¹⁹ And indeed, my own experience at the 2015 Quadrennial brings to mind the famous essay “Walking in the City” by Michel de Certeau. Strolling from one PQ site to another offered ample opportunities to skirt traffic signs, discover shortcuts, and explore back alleys—procedures that resist efforts to enforce institutional or “panoptic” constraints upon pedestrians. As de Certeau noted, “one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy”; such an encounter with the Prague cityscape reinforced the impression that the 2015 PQ had once again exceeded its traditional boundaries.²⁰

The organizers of the Quadrennial coined a tagline for the PQ that gibed well with its diffusion throughout the city: the compound word “SharedSpace.” They also supplemented this key theme with three additional terms: “Music / Weather / Politics.” The “Opening Statement” in the 2015 Program made the case for the selection of these terms as their guiding principles: “Prague Quadrennial 2015 explores scenography as a strong and sometimes invisible force of performance: a power that influences us just like music, weather and politics influence us.” In an explicit nod to the necessary intersection of art and politics, the organizers noted that “the difficulty of orienting one’s self in the fast-changing world makes scenography’s social function very important: here politicians use imagination and fiction while paradoxically artists are often obsessed with the authentic.” Then, echoing the famous tract by Lenin, they posed the question: “So, what is to be done?”²¹

Exhibitors tackled this question from every conceivable angle, their efforts often focused on one of the key terms proffered by the PQ organizers. The Hungarian National Exhibit addressed the “SharedSpace” theme by invoking shared corporeality; its “*Donor for Prometheus*” installation invited visitors to offer their livers to the bound

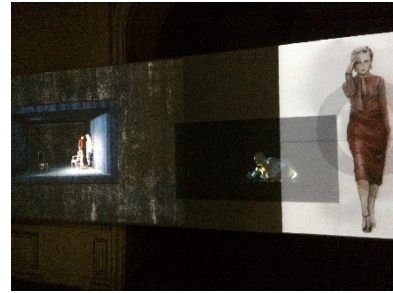


Photo 15: Catalan National Exhibit: “The Work of Alfons Flores”

and suspended figure from the Aeschylus play; given his gift of fire to the human race, the exhibitors argued that this icon of ancient theatre deserved compensation in the form of flesh. “This sort of help,” wrote designer Csaba Antal, “which would be but a modest token of gratitude for all that Prometheus has undertaken and done for the sake of humanity, is made possible only by modern technology, as liver transplants are a recent phenomenon.... Even if your liver is not reincarnated in Prometheus, it would not go to waste, but would be used to save a mortal soul.”²²



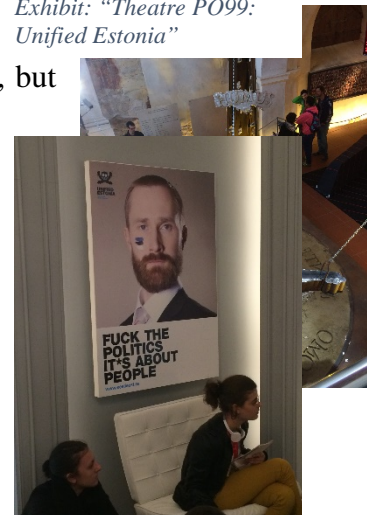
Photo 16: Finnish National Exhibit: “Weather Station”

The Catalonian National Exhibit took “Music” for its focus, highlighting the work of opera scenographer Alfons Flores through a palimpsest of projections and sculpted figures; Flores invites far-flung international audiences into the shared life-worlds of his designs: “Strongly contemporary spaces to house the universal themes of classical opera and reveal them in a new light. Harsh or poetic, but never complacent.”²³ The creators of the Finnish National Exhibit, entitled *Weather Station*, froze microphones in blocks of ice hung from the ceiling, then amplified the sounds of meltwater dripping onto metal plates beneath: “The sound installation recy-

cles

Photo 17: Estonian National Exhibit: “Theatre PO99: Unified Estonia”

cles



cles the continuous phase transitions of water, making them audible in the most spatial, multi-faceted, and nuanced ways.”²⁴ And the Estonian National Exhibit addressed “Politics” with its report on the performance group “Theatre NO99,” whose members created a fictitious movement, “Unified Estonia,” to expose the theatricalization of political life. According to the Estonian exhibitors, “the press was eager to print everything they did or said. Everybody was anxious: will they really create a new political party—despite the fact that on day one, NO99 openly declared that this is a theatre performance. The project culminated with the convention of the Unified Estonia movement on May 7, 2010, attracting more than 7000 viewers. It was one of the largest theatre events in contemporary Europe.”²⁵

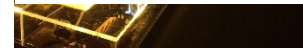
But another recurring concern at the 2015 Quadrennial seemed to link the shared realities of music, weather, and politics to the ultimate shared reality—the experience of death, common to us all. At this PQ, however, death also offered the possibility of renewal and rebirth. I have already noted how the Hungarian National Exhibit invoked liver donation as a chance for the dying donor to save another life. I found similar explorations of death in offerings from both Spain and Norway. The Spanish National Exhibit included an installation entitled *Muerte* that invited visitors to undergo a symbolic death by reclining on a funeral bier. The exhibitors linked this symbolic death

to tropes of entombment and resurrection; given the economic uncertainties of present-day Spain, they argued that “perhaps the best attitude for individuals is to bury their certainties in order to face up to new collective ideals.”²⁶ The Norwegian National Exhibit also featured an installation, this one called *Please Please Me!* and created by renowned scenographer Signe Becker. The grotesquely skeletonized figures stood in deliberate contrast to the baroque staircase on which they were assembled; according to exhibitors, the installation served as both a

Photo 18: Spanish National Exhibit: “Muerte”



Photo 19: Norwegian National Exhibit: “Please Please Me!”



comment and a warning regarding the relative economic well-being of Norway during a time of global crisis: “This situation has created a sort of privileged oasis, which could just as easily become a closed purgatory if complacency prevails.”²⁷

The 2019 Prague Quadrennial

In marked contrast to the 2015 themes, however, the guiding principles for the 2019 PQ favored allegory over social engagement. The 2019 organizers took a cue from the three bronze horses yoked to the Chariot of Victory that graces the roof of the Czech National Theatre. This same sculpture serves as model for the “Golden Triga” prize awarded to the best national exhibit at each Quadrennial, but the emphasis on its abstract symbolism for this particular PQ struck me as a departure from the more pointed provocations of 2015. The “Artistic Concept” included in the 2019 PQ promotional materials explained that “the three horses pulling the chariot symbolize the three stages of human life: youth’s wild instinct and intuition, the experience of adulthood, and the wisdom of age. We will use the metaphor of the Golden Triga to explore these points of view, three areas connected with the cyclical phases of the creative process: Imagination, Transformation, Memory.”²⁸

In some ways, this appeal to the iconic tradition of the Golden Triga gibed neatly with the celebrated return of the Quadrennial to its traditional home, the *Průmyslový palác*—even as the west wing of the exhibition hall remained under repair. Yet I could not help thinking that the triple theme of “Imagination / Transformation / Memory” was remarkably anodyne

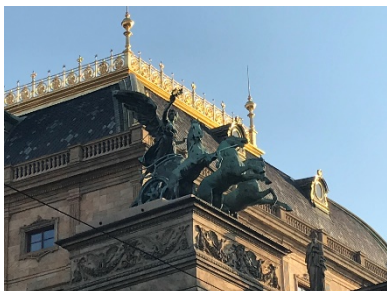


Photo 20: The Three Horses atop the Czech National Theatre

compared to the “Music / Weather / Politics” of 2015. I wondered if this choice of theme was related to recent and rapid changes to the global political landscape. And in fact, this seeming shift in the PQ political perspective recalls another essay by de Certeau entitled “Spatial Stories,” wherein de Certeau distinguished between his use of the two terms “place”

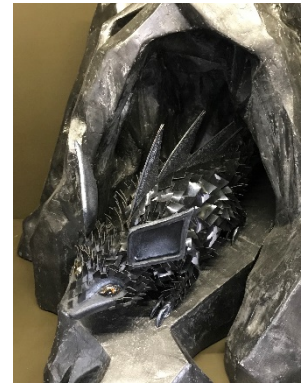
(*lieu*) and “space” (*espace*). For de Certeau, “a *place* is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence.... A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.” On the other hand, de Certeau argued that “*space* is a practiced place,” and in a move that invoked his other essay on the cityscape, he added “thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.”²⁹ Spatializing practices, in other words, tend to disrupt the stability of an established place. It seemed to me, however, that the organizers of the 2019 PQ had addressed this tendency by seeking to block such practices, de-politicizing the “space” of past Quadrennials and restoring the order of a “place” upon it.

Did the PQ organizers actively attempt to dampen political critique by focusing on the ostensibly timeless artistic values allegorized by the three horses atop the Czech National Theatre? Or was I simply succumbing to some sort of PQ political paranoia? Fortunately, my interview with Tom Burch, curator for the US Student Exhibit, assured me that my suppositions were not entirely amiss. Through his affiliation with USITT, Burch has been involved with the Quadrennial since 2011, so he is quite familiar with its organizational dynamics. Burch informed me that the initial 2019 PQ theme was “Porous Borders,” but that the theme disappeared from communiqués at a late date, well after plans for the US Exhibits were underway. Speaking of the early plans of the designers for the US Student Exhibit, Burch told me: “So we were already fairly far in the process of working on things, with this whole ‘Porous Borders’ concept, when all of a sudden that wasn’t there anymore. And it wasn’t talked about.”³⁰ Moreover, when I asked Burch why the organizers might have switched their theme so suddenly, he offered me his cautious but candid opinion:

I presume that the PQ is so heavily funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, I bet that someone said, “can you just not be so hardline,” because clearly the whole “Porous Borders” was speaking to questions of immigration and itinerancy....

and while I don't know anything, I'm betting someone had a conversation with the big PQ people and said "can you just be a little more cautious about the overt politicization?"³¹

Yet politics were not to be dismissed so easily from the 2019 Quadrennial; they emerged through allusion, if not through direct address. Certainly we might read the US Exhibits, with their focus on DNA and diversity, as a challenge to the immigration policy of the current presidential administration. But other nations also offered entries that politicized their presence on the global scene. On the one hand, some



Photos 21 & 22: the *Minor Monsters* "Topo Ruizáceo" and *Elizón*" from the Chilean National Exhibit

countries stressed their own specific contributions to world theatre. The program for the Chilean National Exhibit, for instance, noted that the *Universidad de Chile* housed the only theatre design program in the country; Chilean designers are therefore rare creatures or *Minor Monsters*, the title of the Exhibit itself. Accordingly, the portfolios of all the featured designers were accompanied by intricately built models of fantastic creatures, "beasts formed out of each artist's obsessions and peculiarities, as diverse as they are related, almost by blood."³² Thus the *Topo Ruizáceo* emerging from its burrow reflected the preference of scenographer Rodrigo Ruiz for strong, sharp lines in his compositions, while the *Elizón* resting upon a tousele of thread represented the penchant of costume designer Elizabeth Pérez for weaving original textiles for her creations.



Photo 23: Danish National Exhibit: "'Virgin'"

On the other hand, some countries offered more metaphorical statements about the challenges of international coexistence. The Danish National Exhibit, for example, was entitled *Virgin* and featured a self-professed virgin resting

within a rotating glass coffin; actual blood samples were periodically drawn from the young man and distributed by lottery in sealed glass vials. The catalogue entry for the exhibit echoed the ancient superstition that “the virgin’s blood is a magical substance with the power to heal and bring happiness.”³³ Yet in the context of the Quadrennial, this visually arresting but deeply unsettling exhibit also suggested that the trade in innocent blood through acts of war, human trafficking, or other such atrocities is an equally irresponsible means of addressing global crises.



Photo 24: Excavation Site for “Excavating the Remains of French Scenography”



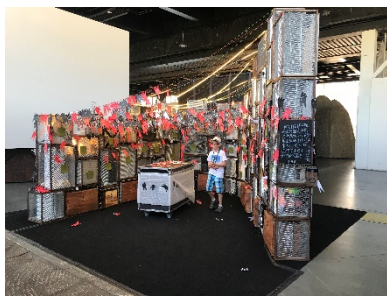
Photo 25: New Design Creation from “Excavating Remains of French Scenography”

But among the exhibits and events of the 2019 PQ that I found most compelling, several addressed the politicization of participating in the Quadrennial itself. Consider one in the series of “Site-Specific Performances” staged throughout the greater Exhibition Grounds entitled *Excavating the Remains of French Scenography in Prague*. Due to longstanding conflicts with PQ organizers, France had been absent from the last four Quadrennials; this days-long performance project “intend(ed) to unearth an imaginary French scenography that would have remained buried in Prague, preventing its official participation at the PQ since 2003!”³⁴ During the “Excavation” visitors were invited to dig into the now-demolished site where France had displayed its last exhibits. Visitors could compare the debris they discovered to archives of French designs from pre-2003 PQs, then use the provided raw materials to create their own designs that “might have been” if France actually had taken part in the last four Quadrennials.

Other exhibits explored the political history of Prague as the PQ host site. The catalogue entry for the Russian Student Exhibit innocuously announced that the presenters were pleased to offer “a network of theatres, available for everyone to visit everywhere with the help of our specially equipped theatre box.”³⁵ In fact, the “network of theatres” referenced the hundreds of tram stops located throughout Prague; the exhibit featured a replica stop commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Jan Palach, a Czech youth who immolated himself in protest of the August 1968 Soviet invasion. The tram stop was furnished with a “theatre box” or peepshow projection booth featuring archival footage from the August Invasion, along with contemporary reflections



Photos 28-29: Philippines Student Exhibit: “Passing Through: Lines and Borders”



Photos 30 – 31: The Hong Kong Regional Exhibit on June 12, 2019



Photo 27: Russian Student Exhibit: “Integrated Sceptacle Project Presentation”



from bystanders on its historical significance.

Still other offerings shifted attention from the past to the present day. The award-winning Philippines Student Exhibit, entitled *Passing Through: Lines and Borders* “focused on the subject of migration and mobility by using the visa interrogation booth as an initial basis of the experience.”³⁶ The exhibit placed visitors within a grid of live-feed video devices, then submitted them to the same questions faced by

Philippine immigrants seeking entrance to other countries; visitors

could monitor their own facial and vocal reactions to such queries on the live-feed monitors.

But the urgency of international politics was most apparent in the Hong Kong National Exhibit. The catalogue entry stated that the

“majority of designers are invited to compose an ‘all-in-one’ installation to represent the full spectrum of local theatre design.”³⁷ But in fact they demonstrated their “all-in-one” ethos even more powerfully in responding to the massive protests over an extradition bill that erupted in Hong Kong during the Quadrennial. Designers cloaked their work with black paper and handwritten notes, along with electronic devices that live-streamed the action in the streets.

Conclusion

Here it seems vital to restate that while some PQ exhibits and events overtly address the political, the Quadrennial itself is always and intrinsically *politicized*, inasmuch as its international encounters, staged through the medium of art, embody the “it should be otherwise” invoked by Adorno. Certainly the editors of the 2020 issue of the journal *Theatre and Performance Design* dedicated to the Quadrennial wished for an “otherwise” when they reported that in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, “most of the material you will encounter in this special issue was prepared while the authors were adjusting to various stages of lockdown in their respective countries.”³⁸ Crucially, their remarks reflect not only the bitter vicissitudes of the pandemic itself, but also the pandemic politics that have set nation against nation in bids to cast blame, close borders, and hoard vital resources from one another. I ask myself how this year of global crisis might affect the next Quadrennial in 2023. Will COVID-19 seem little more than a terrible memory, or will its ripple effects still rock the PQ some three years hence? I have no way of knowing, but I hope to continue my PQ research and share it in the years to come.

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Special Thanks

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Notes

1. Quoted in Ptáčková, Věra, *A Mirror of World Theatre*, trans. Karolina Vočadlo, Prague: Theatre Institute Prague, 1995, 6.
2. While nearly eighty countries took part in the 2019 Quadrennial, it is important to note that their locations were not evenly distributed around the globe. As usual, Europe, the Americas, and Southern and Eastern Asia dominated the PQ. Sub-Saharan African and predominantly Muslim countries were underrepresented, and their exhibits were relatively modest in their scope. The reasons for this may lie in lack of funding or national interest in the Quadrennial, concerns over the control of exhibit content, or the fact that many indigenous performance traditions from these regions do not gibe well with the expectations set for Western theatre. Certainly more research is needed on this matter, but unfortunately it lies outside the scope of the present inquiry.
3. *Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, 2019 Program (PQ 2019 Program)*, Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute, 2019, 26.
4. *Ibid.*, 40.
5. Retrieved via QR Code from the display of the Romanian National Exhibit; date of retrieval February 5, 2020.
6. *PQ 2019 Program*, 33.
7. *Ibid.*, 71.
8. *Ibid.*, 99.
9. *Ibid.*, 80.
10. See Hofstadter, Albert, et al, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1976. For Kant, see pp. 280 – 343. For Hegel, see pp. 378 – 445.
11. Adorno, Theodore, “Commitment,” in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Arato et al, New York: Bloomsbury, 1985, 317.
12. Jindra, in Ptáčková, 5 – 6.
13. Ptáčková, 11.
14. *Ibid.*, 49.
15. *Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, 2011 Program (PQ 2011 Program)*, Prague: Czech Republic Ministry of Culture, 2011, 9.
16. *Ibid.*, 8. The original Czech the the 2011 PQ theme is “*v nehybném bodě světa, jenž se točí: velkolepá hra těles shromážděných pod světlem.*” I asked my LSU colleague Josef Horaček, a native Czech speaker, for help on this translation. He confirmed that the English translation is accurate, but also noted that it seemed metaphorical in the original Czech. My thanks to Horaček for his assistance.

17. The 2019 *PQ Program* notes that the 1991 Quadrennial was not held at the Průmyslový palác, but the Program does not give a reason for this anomaly. See page 5.
18. *PQ 2011 Program*, 281.
19. Příhodová, Barbora, Joslin McKinney, and Sodja Lotker, “The Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2015, in *Theatre and Performance Design*, 2: 1-2 (2016), 6.
20. de Certeau, Michel, “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Stephen Rendell, Berkeley: U of California P, 1984, 96.
21. *Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, 2015 Program (PQ 2015 Program)*, Prague: Czech Republic Ministry of Culture, 2015, 10.
22. *Ibid.*, 176.
23. *Ibid.*, 143.
24. *Ibid.*, 96.
25. *Ibid.*, 90.
26. *Ibid.*, 264.
27. *Ibid.*, 195.
28. Transcription from personal photograph of documents on display at PQ exhibition site.
29. de Certeau, Michel, “Spatial Stories,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. Stephen Rendell, Berkeley: U of California P, 1984, 117.
30. Personal interview with Tom Burch, recorded June 7, 2019, 33:48. In her “Forward” to the 2020 Issue of *Theatre and Performance Design*, Artistic Director of the 2019 PQ, Markéta Fantová, confirms that the theme “Porous Borders” was introduced at the first meeting of Quadrennial organizers in 2017. But she fails to explain why this initial topic disappeared from subsequent conversations. (8)
31. Interview with Burch, 34:40.
32. *Monstruos Menores / Minor Monsters, a Bestiary of the Chilean Theatre*, Santiago: Gobierno de Chile, 2019, 11. For information on the designs of Ruiz, see 89; for information on Pérez, see 63.
33. *2019 PQ Program*, 18.
34. *Ibid.*, 64.
35. *Ibid.*, 38.

36. Ibid., 37. The Philippines Student Exhibit won the 2019 PQ Award for “Imagination in Student Exhibition.”

37. Ibid., 19. My thanks to Comparative Literature PhD candidate Jing Tan for translating the handwritten signs in the photographs.

38. Collins, Jane, and Arnold Aronson, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Theatre and Performance Design*, 6: 1-2 (2020), 1.