

"An' now I'll show you the stable where Jesus was born, an' put into the manger for a cradle. It looks pretty in the picture, with the hay, and the donkeys, and the bullocks, an' the smart dresses; but I expect it was only a poor sort of place. If the Prince of Wales had been born in the Folly, folks wouldn't ha' believed as he was the Prince of Wales; so it ain't much to be wondered at that them as expected Christ to come into the world with a crown on His head, like, wouldn't believe there could be much in a poor carpenter's son, born in a stable. But yet there He was – just as you might find a sovereign in the mud, an' fancy it only a farden, till you come to change it – that is, if the folks you took it to was honest. If they was honest, though, p'raps they'd think you wasn't an' wouldn't give you change. It ain't like that with Jesus Christ. The poorest child as ever was has got a right to lay hold of Him, an' can get full vally for Him.

"An' here's Joseph and Mary an' Jesus, agoin' down into Egypt. They went there, you know, because Herod wanted to kill Jesus afore He'd done what He was sent to do. Don't that sound silly? An' here's Herod's soldiers killin' the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under; an' the poor mothers cryin' as if their hearts would break. That's hard, ain't it? But, p'raps, some of them poor little kids would ha' called out 'Crucify Him,' if they'd been left to grow up; an' God loved 'em so that He wouldn't giv' 'em the chance to go wrong. Though I'm fond o' you, an' I think you like me a bit, I know I'd rather see you dead as you are, than gettin' big boys and gals to learn bad ways.

"An' now I'll show you my last picture, and I think it's one o' the prettiest in the lot. Here's the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, that the wild beast mayn't get hold on 'em. There's the little lambs snugglin' up to their mothers as natural as babies. An' there's the angels up in the sky, with their white wings and goold rings round their heads, and them branches like rhubarb-stalks in their hands – palms they're meant for. An' they're singin' jest as you may hear the singers up in the gallery at church, only a deal sweeter, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.' Them was the first Christmas Waits. It'ud be nice to hear music like that now in the cold mornings, wouldn't it? But now we'll have our supper, an' sing a verse, an' then we'll say good night, for it's time the little 'uns was in bed."

A bun a-piece for the children was the supper with a sip of elderberry wine, warmed in a vessel like a hollow horn (which the bricklayer's labourer, stirred up to abnormal activity and benevolence, borrowed from the public). And then we sang "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," and the little party broke up; everybody wishing everybody else – our host especially – "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." Custom has dimmed and chilled those cordial words; but the grateful heartiness of the young Folly folk made them leap out again into warm light.

REVIEW

SOMA OR IMAGINING THE BODY

Oona Libens' Scientific Shadow Theatre

Nele Wynants

Oona Libens was the first recipient of the MLS Dick Balzer Award (see TML 21) for Soma that is reviewed in this article. See www.oonalibens.org for more about Oona's work.

Soma is the final work in Oona Libens' trilogy of poetic-scientific performances. It was premiered in Brussels on 30 November 2018, at Working Title Festival, Workspace Brussels and is performed in English.

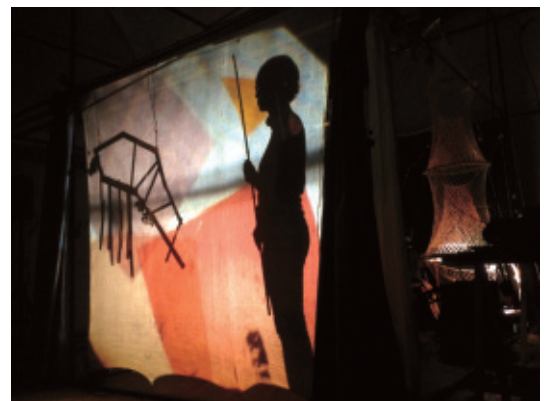
With *Nausea* (2014), the artist used primitive projection techniques to explore the wonderful and mysterious underwater world. In a style reminiscent of a somewhat dated nature documentary, a radio voice led the audience along the glistening water surface to the dark ocean floor. Along the way, we were told about the most bizarre of marine lifestyles. *Celeste* (2012) offered a journey through the universe. In this work, Libens' shadow theatre was an observatory in which suns, moons, planets and other celestial bodies passed before the telescope. The foundation of this work was at once simple and ultimately refined. In a type of exaggerated marionette theatre, she crafted a fairy universe held together with wires and projection. The result was a complex construction of fragile mechanisms, wheels, ropes, shells, fish hooks and pieces of paper and cardboard. The soundtrack was provided by an old-fashioned tape recorder. As a result, she broke away from the two-dimensional screen to create an analogue virtual reality that occupied the middle ground between an educational documentary and an abstract animation film.

In her latest work *Soma*, the object of study is the micro-cosmos of the human body. The anatomical lecture opens with the skin – 'that touch screen of the human body' – the boundary between inside and outside. Libens visualises the sense of touch literally through the magnified projection of her own hand. Together with her assistant, the shadow actor then dives into the self-made theatre machinery – a team of engineers descending gradually deeper into the human body. We follow the path of a piece of cake that is brought to the mouth by her projected hand, thus beginning its descent through the 'digestive system' – in the laconic words of the artist, 'a live stream through the blood stream'. In several episodes, the eloquent radio narrator informs us about the respiratory system, the immune system, the nervous system and the cognitive system.

The various stages are visualised in real time, based on historical and more recent projection mechanisms, from shadow theatre (as the most primitive form of moving images) to many other analogue projection media and techniques including 16mm film, slide projections and episcopes, which Libens manipulates on stage. She also uses a self-made magic lantern, as it was an exceptionally important instrument in education and entertainment. All these types of early visual media constitute an important source of inspiration for Libens, who uses them once again in dialogue with modern visual techniques and integrates them into her live theatre.

We see this imagery emerge in the combination of analogue techniques. It is at once poetic and instructive, like Libens' 19th-century predecessors who produced scientific theatre that was both educational and spectacular. It is no coincidence that Libens' company is named *Teatro Dondolo*, a reference to a 19th-century company of travelling puppeteers. Libens thus positions herself within a longer tradition of travelling artists whose spectacles introduced scientific experiments, new technologies and a changing visual culture on their travels through towns and cities.

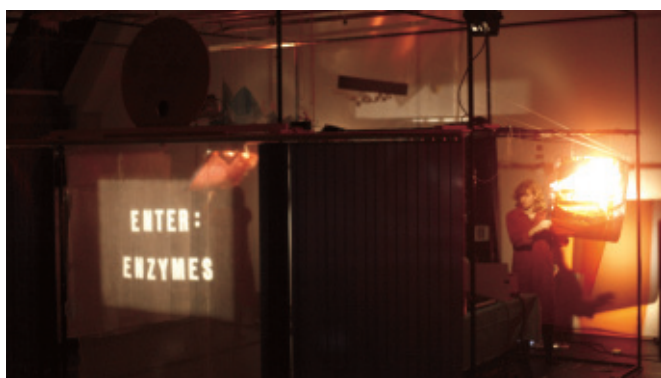
Just consider the many anatomical cabinets that travelled to European fairs, informing audiences about human anatomy and its deviations.¹ These wax-figure cabinets were initially intended to be used for the





education of medical students. In the second half of the 19th century, however, anatomical museums became a popular attraction at fairs. In these museums, cross-sections and parts of the human body introduced visitors to the development of new life, childbirth, operations and diseases, as well as the terrible consequences of sexual promiscuity (e.g. syphilis).² In the 1830s, microscopy was also attracting great public admiration. Tiny insects and the vermin in a drop of water were magnified to monstrous proportions with a projection microscope, to the horrified amazement of the audience. For the first time, people could see things that were invisible to the naked eye.³

These scientific instruments provide a spectacular display of what we cannot see with the naked eye – from the movement of celestial bodies to the interior of the human body. They provide access to invisible knowledge about the world. Oona Libens' performance series is a novel and entertaining variation on this theme. The young artist's media-archaeological work is indeed inspired by scientific experiments and findings, but with a unique twist. The focus is not so much on the dissemination of knowledge as on the relativity of scientific knowledge and the representations of such knowledge. Libens' shadow theatre is literally a viewing device: the observer sees the masterful manner in which the images are constructed with light, shadow, paper and cardboard, as well as how they are brought to life in the projection. She shows the 'messy process' through which images are created. Thus, we



are reminded that scientific knowledge about our universe is always mediated by the instruments that are available to science at a given moment in time.

Libens' performances literally unveil how images are produced, thus reminding the audience that the knowledge that we think we have regarding anatomy, our natural world and the universe is always a representation, brought about through the mediation of scientific instruments. The performance thus draws attention to the entanglement of humans and technology in historical and contemporary practices of producing and sharing knowledge about the universe. At the same time, it points to parallels between the development of the interaction between scientists and their instruments throughout the history of science and the interaction between humans and media technology.

Oona Libens' performance thus demonstrates that what we encounter is not a transparent window that opens to outer space, the underwater world or the inside of the human body, but technologically produced ways of imagining what these natural worlds must be like. The performance reminds us of how our understanding of the world (in various historical periods) is based on what is available to human perception, in combination with what various tools and technologies have helped us to discover.

In Libens' case, this intertwining of humans and devices can be taken quite literally. Like a puppeteer in a mechanical theatre – historically known as a *Theatrum mundum* – she disappears as an actor from the centre of the scene into the machinery, which she operates at the same time. This machinery is slow and fragile, and it falters at times, making the members of the audience hold their breath. These are the best moments of the performance, when the only thing that can be seen is the silhouette of Libens at work, like a puppeteer overlapping with the marionette show. This playful twist on the format of the lecture performance invites us to take a new look at representations of knowledge through the looking glass of media-archaeology, in order to uncover alternative visualisations of the world we think that we know.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Chloé Pirson, *Corps à corps : Les modèles anatomiques entre art et médecine*. Mare & Martin, 2009; Tinne Claes and Veronique Deblon, 'Van panoramisch naar preventief. Populariserende anatomische musea in de Lage Landen (1850-1880)', *De Negentiende Eeuw*, 39, 2015, pp.287-306; Christiane Py and Cécile Vidart, 'Les musées d'anatomie sur les champs de foire', *Actes de la recherche en science sociale*, 60, 1985, Images 'populaire', pp.3-10
2. Patrick Vanden Berghe, *800 jaar Meifoor Brugge [800th anniversary of the Meifoor street fair in Bruges]*, Gevaert Graphics NV, Zwevezele, pp.55-56. For photographs of the wax figures, see Van Genechten, *ibid.* pp.169-186
3. See: 'Mediated Visions of Life: An Archaeology of Microscopic Theatre' in *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance: Deep Time of the Theatre*, Nele Wynants (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019, pp.253-272

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