

Chapter Four

Temporal Sites: *Moving Site, Moving Time*

To trouble linear temporality—to suggest that time may be touched, crossed, visited or revisited, that time is transitive and flexible, that time may recur in time, that time is not one—never only one—is to court the ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality. —Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 2011

There is no beginning, middle or end. The narrative happens over the course of the whole performance so you might come in 4 hours after it started and see the very beginning of the play, or you might come in at the very beginning just in time for the end. —Jim Findlay, *Huffington Post*, 2014

Dealey Plaza

A few years ago I visited the site of John F. Kennedy's assassination when I happened to be in Dallas for a conference. Dealey Plaza was less than ten minutes away from my hotel, so I decided to check it out. I had only two hours to spare. Tickets to The Sixth Floor Museum were sold out. The museum, named after the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD), where three spent cartridge shells were discovered with a sniper's perch and rifle within forty-five minutes after President Kennedy was shot, recreated the crime scene in the actual space where it had occurred. I had really wanted to see it, to stand in the very place where history had been made on November 22, 1963. I settled for the \$2.50 cell phone audio tour of the museum's surroundings around Dealey Plaza. With the detailed map in hand, I listened to the descriptions I had downloaded on the museum's app at all of the stops. These included "the grassy knoll" on the northwest side of the Plaza, famous for the myriad conspiracy theories that claim it as the place where another assassin may have stood; a pedestal that marks where Abraham Zapruder unexpectedly filmed what became the only color movie of the assassination; the X on the street at the precise location where President Kennedy was fatally shot as the motorcade was headed toward the Triple Underpass, itself another site where many witnesses stood and later gave multiple testimonies of what they remember the past for future generations. Many of these sites include photographs or archive material, sometimes remnants of clothes or objects that serve as testimony. Some places have survivors, who recount their experiences as living proof of what happened.³ While the aim might not necessarily be to relive traumatic experiences, but more importantly, to not forget them so they may not be repeated, the physical interaction with a location's history very often does have an affect on its visitors. A location and its context—in particular its relation to the past—becomes a crucial factor in determining the experience an individual might have while visiting that site. In her book *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider writes about live reenactment, which she describes as "the practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act."⁴ Her focus is on both civil war reenactments ("replayed war" [Schneider, 2]) and time-based art ("replayed art" [Schneider, 2]), the latter of which, as Schneider emphasizes, has "exploded in performance-based art" (Schneider, 10). Schneider distinguishes the practice of reenactment from living history: whereas reenactment mostly refers to the replay of events as accurately as possible, living history refers to "the activity of enacting a past way of life where there may be no 'event' of record" (Schneider, 187). This distinction is important, since it indicates how reenactment references a specific event. Her interest, be it in art reenactment or battle reenactment, lies in those live reenactments that strive for literal precision, where reenacting a past event just so means the re-living of that event. As Schneider writes, "they will have touched time and time will have recurred." This constant interplay between "what really happened" in relation to "keeping the past alive" is what Schneider calls "the syncopated time of reenactment, where then and now punctuate each other" (Schneider, 2). She argues how in these cases performance itself is the archive, disappearing and recording simultaneously⁵ ("the past is not [entirely] dead, since it can be accessed live"). Schneider politicizes the "stakes of reenactment,"⁶ by troubling the linear temporality of chronological time: "What if time (re) turns? What does it drag along with it?" (Schneider, 2) she asks, suggesting, instead, that time may indeed be "touched, crossed, visited or revisited, that time is transitive and flexible, that time may recur in time" (Schneider, 30).

My own JFK tourist experience at Dealey Plaza was clearly not a reenactment. At least not in the way "reenactment" is traditionally defined as a redoing of a previous event. Although I may have been reliving an event in my mind that was not the actual event but the event reimagined from books, movies, and the media, it was more of a live retelling of sorts, an itinerant retracing of footsteps, with the help of a curator's voice on audio. And yet there was something about being physically present in that location, in the act of moving through that space—listening to the audio guide, retracing steps, seeing the events play out in my mind as I visited the landmarks—that had caused the past to reappear, if only in my imagination. The site in this case was the very location where the event happened, so I was

very much on-site, and yet experienced the event off-time. Its temporal presence had depended on its specific (geographic and historic) location in conjunction with my embodied choreography through the space. My off-time moment referenced a real event that had occurred not only without me but also before my time. Like Schneider, I am drawn to the relationship of embodied practice to time: bodies in space, as they move in a particular location that cites the past, or stops time, or stalls it, repeats or loops it, or perhaps even projects toward a future. I am interested in how activating space (on-location space, specifically) through the manipulation of bodies in performance (both performer and spectator bodies), dislocates time and renders a nonlinear, “off-time” temporality in the now, *on-site*. Rather than focus on the reenactment of a specific event, however, I’d like to examine aesthetic practices that manipulate time through an *embodied* encounter with space. Where does the performance “take us,” both literally (physically) and metaphorically? What alternative approaches to space *on-site* propose alternative conceptions of time?

Temporal Reconsiderations

In his book *Shakespeare, Theatre, and Time*, Matthew D. Wagner addresses the nature of time in theatre. Grounded on Edmund Husserl’s ideas on time consciousness—the counterintuitive notion that it is our individual subjective experience of time (phenomenological time) that regulates and grounds objective time (clock time) and not the other way around⁷—Wagner argues that theatre, by its very ontology, “fosters temporal discordance,” since it presents us with “both time schemes at once” (Wagner, 15). The theatre, irrespective of the intentions of the playwright, director, or actor, makes us aware of both clock time and inner time, simultaneously. In Wagner’s words, theatre shuttles us back and forth between each, “by not reconciling the one with the other or explaining one in terms of the other” (Wagner, 18). Theatre therefore “helps us experience” Husserl’s notion that “clock time is not real time, in spite of its prominence in our everyday lives” (Wagner, 18). Temporal dissonance is only one aspect of Wagner’s bigger project, which is to counter the linear perception of time as we *experience* it in the theatre. The other important quality to theatre’s out of joint-ness is what Wagner identifies as “an amplified ‘thickness’ or density” (Wagner, 28). Explains Wagner: “Between the two [Husserl and Heidegger], we have a useful and apt way to think about the phenomenon of the theatrical present: it is a way of being present that, largely because of the theatre’s temporal frame, strongly incorporates the past and the future” (Wagner, 29–30). This temporal density, as Wagner calls it, which characterizes every present moment as it is experienced in the theatre, is largely unavailable in our everyday lives: “In the life of the theatrical event, birth and death stay with us, are present to us, in much more palpable and direct ways than they are otherwise” (Wagner, 31). Wagner’s “thick present,” while rich in its undoing of a chronological temporality in theatre as it is experienced live, moment to moment, is nevertheless aligned with an ahistorical framework. In her book *The Past Is the Present; It’s the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, Christine Ross argues that contemporary art’s “temporal turn” is visible in the aesthetic practices that “connect temporality and historicity.”⁸ Ross examines practices that, she argues, bring historicity into the present, which she claims are unique in their encompassing “both a contemporalization (of temporal passing) and a reactivation (of historicity).”⁹ For Ross, artists involved in this “temporal turn” are not only shifting away from conceptualizing time as continuous, or linear, but also, and simultaneously, questioning the modernist notion of history as progress. They are instead moving “towards a post-metaphysical ‘presentifying’ aesthetics of reorientation of modern conventions of historical time.”¹⁰ In other words, Ross is getting at those aesthetic practices in the visual arts that help us feel time, so as to consider the possibility of a different kind of past-in-the-present. Ross’s work on alternative temporalities is tied to a critical historicity that is continuously reinvented, reinterpreted, and possibly reimaged and therefore reoccurring, time and time again. It is akin to Schneider’s account of a nonlinear temporality in reenactment that works against Western capitalist formulations of time as progress. Schneider is also very much interested in a nonchronological temporal possibility where performance, as opposed to a disappearing act (an allusion to Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked*), is the record of the thing it alludes to. I’d like to consider how the possibility of an “off-time” time at site, as I introduced earlier, is an alternative temporality that is aligned with such nonchronological underpinnings. I will focus on three performances whose alteration of space, either fixed in a specific geographical location (tied to a historical moment), or sensorial in an immersive installation, enabled us to experience time differently. Branislav Jakovljevic, in his introduction to a special issue of *Performance Research* on time, reminds us how “experimental performance [has been] invested in a search for alternative temporalities” since the early twentieth century, “with the invention of irregular times of performance, from durational performance, to marathon theatre, to ritualized action” all of which can be seen “as an expression of performance’s inherent foreignness to the abstract time of the clock and the calendar.”¹¹ In the examples that follow, which vary widely in scope, I examine how the specificity of location—on site—affects both Wagner’s notion of temporal dissonance, as well as Ross’s critical historicity. How might the manipulation of space mobilize time? What forms of off-time experience were rendered due to the audiences’ embodied experience in those spaces?

Moving Off Time

On August 13 and 14 of 2003, a one-hour long performance called *Geyser Land*, conceived and directed by video artist Mary Ellen Strom and choreographer Ann Carlson, took place in a twenty-five-mile strip of land between Livingston and Bozeman, Montana. A total of about thirteen hundred audience members (about 350 at a time) boarded a ten-car passenger train operated by Montana Rockies Rail Tours, “a classic 50’s carrier à la Hitchcock,” as the *New York Times* described it, complete “with dome cars, a classy dining car, a club car and vestibules in which Dutch doors open halfway so that the mountains rushing by seem almost touchable.”¹² The train’s architecture was reminiscent of “those great family vacations!” as was advertised, with windows designed for 360-degree viewing of the outdoor scenic landscape. En route, the passenger spectators witnessed large-scale video projections of roaming and now-absent buffalo onto the mountains surrounding the traveling train and Eadweard Muybridge’s animal motion studies. Passengers arriving at the Bozeman depot observed scenes from the 1895 film *Arrival of a Train at the Station* by the Lumière Brothers, and Edwin Porter’s *Great Train Robbery* from 1903 projected onto an abandoned refrigerator truck, as well as short scenes appropriated from classic Western films such as *Western Frontier Horizon* (1937).¹³ Passengers also saw tableaux vivant—archival photographs from the turn of the twentieth century to 1972 that were strategically restaged by Ann Carlson, with live performers on the spots where the images were originally taken—spaced throughout the landscape outside the train.¹⁴ Presented by the Myrna Loy Center in Helena, Montana, in conjunction with the Montana Arts Council and the Livingston Depot Center, *Geyser Land* was part installation, part historical reenactment, part community project, part train ride, and part living sculpture, as the artists described it.¹⁵ It was a conceptual tour experience that used both the natural scenery and the train ride as the performance space in order to re-examine, in the present, a contested historical narrative of conquest and colonization. The location was chosen precisely because of its loaded, and often ignored history regarding the treatment of Native Americans (the Northern Plain Indians known as Crow Nation) who were pushed out of Yellowstone Park and allowed back in the park after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Bozeman Pass, as the artist statement explains, “remained one of the longest contested sites between white settlers and the non-treaty Northern Plain Indians, which ended when the Northern Pacific Railroad forged a tunnel through the pass in 1880.”¹⁶ In other words, the removal of the Northern Plains Indians was directly linked to the existence of the passenger train the audience boards as part of the performance and its attraction as a tourist site. Both film and transcontinental railroad industries were new experiences for people at the turn of the twentieth century. Contemporary audiences were in a moving train observing the moving images—similar to the way that original passengers had discovered for the first time the landscape (and film) as moving picture. This layering of experiences sets the audience of *Geyser Land* on another sort of time travel, where both cinema and the moving landscape are experienced as if anew.

A little over a year after *Geyser Land*, from September 8 to 11, 2004, another form of multisite and itinerant performance took place over a two-hundred-mile route in southeastern Kentucky. *RFK in EKY*, conceived and directed by Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) founder John Malpede, was a “real time, site-specific intermedia performance” event that recreated, thirty-six years later, Robert F. Kennedy’s original 1968 War on Poverty tour in the region.¹⁷ The performance, produced with LAPD’s co-director Henriëtte Brouwers, alongside Appalshop (an arts and media organization in Whitesburg, which is a town of sixteen hundred in the heart of eastern Kentucky), included a procession of motor vehicles, two official hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty (held at Vortex and Fleming-Neon, Kentucky), roadside visits with individual families, walking tours of Liberty Street and strip mine sites, a stop at the former one-room schoolhouse in Barwick, and verbatim reenactments of RFK’s interviews and speeches on streets, in courthouses, and at the local college with actor participants. Using the original landscape and its community (with an all-local cast of hundreds), *RFK in EKY* invited participants to reflect on present-day conditions of Appalachia and alternative visions for the future by engaging with this familiar, and in this case, local, historical event. It is an example of what Scott Magelssen calls “invocational simming,” where audiences both enact and rehearse for a future reality and advocate for it, embodying the change they want to see.¹⁸ *RFK in EKY* reenacted encounters and speeches from the most significant events of Robert Kennedy’s highly publicized poverty tour in Appalachia, which occurred one month before he announced his presidential run and four months before his assassination in 1968. In Malpede’s words, *RFK in EKY* was an opportunity “to revisit the essential and still pertinent questions raised in the original visit” during a pivotal election year, a few months before George W. Bush was to be re-elected for a second term as president of the United States.¹⁹ Unfortunately, due to distance and expense, I did not experience either *Geyserland* or *RFK in EKY* firsthand—which points to the critical element of site specificity in both pieces.²⁰ Their unique and critical location targeted the local community and its residents as the audience members, who were participant performers, as I will soon discuss. To

uproot the productions and perform them elsewhere would have been impossible, and more significantly, pointless. These were performances whose site specificity was wholly ingrained in the land: in its history, its access (or lack thereof), its people and culture, and its community. What is particularly striking about both these performances, besides their enormous scale—both took four years to make, included casts and crew of over a hundred people, required an extensive budget, and produced lengthy documentation and multimedia archives—is how both activated time through wide open, porous, neglected, and rural spaces. RFK in EKY used the region's sites to enable people to circulate and recontextualize their own surroundings, creating landmarks of perhaps forgotten architectures. Geyser Land created a tourist experience to revisit and question historical formulations of the landscape. In both of these performances, the dramaturgy of reenactment was completely linked to the dramaturgy of site (what story the space revealed), allowing content and place to merge in recreating a significant moment in history as future-present. Both Geyser Land and RFK in EKY are connected to a new historicity: a way of looking at the past (through specific location and embodiment) that challenges that past as progress. As Strom and Carlson explain, "The project, among other things, sought to challenge and dismantle the notion of history as a continuous development."²¹ Malpede, in his artist statement, also counters the aim of reenactment as a nostalgic act, seeking instead "to inject history with critical thinking" through this onetime, four-day performance. In both cases, the dramaturgy and simultaneity of events changed not only the way its audience/participants perceived space but, more significantly, the way they perceived its history in relation to the present. As Jan Cohen-Cruz observed of RFK in EKY, "I felt like I was time traveling, back and forth, between 1968 and now."²² Both of these productions manipulated time precisely by immersing audiences spatially. Another, very different performance, one that I'd nevertheless also like to consider in relation to Geyser Land and RFK in EKY as another spatially activated "off-time" immersion, is *Dream of the Red Chamber*, an installation for a sleeping audience directed by Jim Findlay, conceived and written with Jeff Jackson, which I saw in New York City in 2014. For the performance, which was loosely based on the epic eighteenth-century Chinese novel of the same name (*Shítóu jì*) by Cao Xueqin, also known as *The Story of the Stone*, Findlay and his team built an underground environment that was a cross between a den-like brothel and a luxurious spa, filled with forty red-sheeted cots—all in the basement of the Brill Building in the middle of Times Square. The audience could come and go at any time between 5:00 P.M. and midnight. We could sleep, and were in fact encouraged to do so during the show—hence the late viewing hours and, on other days, additional overnight performances that lasted until 6:00 A.M. If Geyser Land and RFK in EKY took inspiration from historical events and staged them on location, circulating audiences not only through motor vehicles, buildings, landscapes, and pathways but also displacing them through time, *Dream of the Red Chamber* suspended time, daring us to surrender to it by asking us to embrace what seems like the most passive state par excellence, sleep. In addition, by encouraging audiences to come and go as they pleased (physically and metaphorically), and creating a place where we were in fact encouraged to tune out, *Red Chamber* enabled us, paradoxically, to wake up, to be present in the here and now, between altered states of consciousness. It allowed me to contemplate the possibility of dreams as reality, and reality as a dream: an off time where presence and absence are one and the same. Before delving into each of these performances in detail, however, let's first look at the notion of movement and mobilities in space and time.

Mobilities in Space and Time

In her book *Performance, Transport, and Mobility: Making Passage*, Fiona Wilkie addresses different modes of transport, including walking, boats, trains, automobiles, and airplanes, as well as performances that either take place inside such systems of transport or whose content is shaped by them. Focusing on a range of performances that "work against the logic of uninterrupted flow," Wilkie demonstrates how these encourage spectators "to register their passage as a complex activity,"²³ essentially fostering a form of criticality. As such, Wilkie argues, they make passage, and develop a means of shaping how we might experience transit. She writes, "Performance not only responds to but can also produce mobilities, reshaping existing models of engendering new, alternative possibilities for movement."²⁴ Wilkie connects the notion of transit to the mobility turn in the social sciences, which analyzes social practices in terms of movement instead of spatial rootedness,²⁵ and is keen to unveil what David Creswell terms the "historical conditions that produce specific forms of movement."²⁶ Prior to *Making Passage*, Wilkie wrote about site-specific practices, most notably in the United Kingdom, as well as itinerant performance.²⁷

As her research developed, Wilkie explored the ways performance addressed issues of mobility and transport, even when "grounded" in a specific location. She articulated an important shift in site-specific practices from inhabiting a place to moving through spaces,²⁸ as artists began to transport audiences from one place to another. In a special issue

of Contemporary Theatre Review on “Site-Specificity and Mobility,” Anna Birch emphasizes how “site” is “more mobile than the discourse generally permits,” and explores the concept of mobility as an engagement with the action of moving in order to “upset the ‘fixedness’ of site’s specificity.”²⁹ As Henri Lefebvre famously argues in *The Production of Space*, space, which is socially constructed, actively shapes an event; the space itself is never fixed; it continuously evolves as a social entity.³⁰ Wilkie, who also contributed to this collection with “Site-Specific Performance and the Mobility Turn,” argues how contemporary site practices might incorporate “other ways of being on the move.”³¹ Wilkie highlights the embodied activity of movement and circulation of audiences that goes beyond walking—beyond the psychogeographic mapping practices or sound walks—encouraging us to think about less visible figures on the move (the refugee, the migrant, the vagrant, the nomad) and the various modes of moving practices: “Even when site-specific practice is conceived as intrinsically tied to physicality and meanings of one site, and therefore in some ways immobile, attending it often requires a different kind of mobility of its audience than the usual modes of theatre-going.”³² She highlights three ways in particular: audience transport to/from site, journey as mode of performance, and invitation to think about what it means to be in transit.

I find Wilkie’s audience-centered approach a useful tool for looking closely at how Geyser Land, RFK in EKY, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* dislocate and therefore mobilize time and audience/participants, and how both are contingent upon the other. The audience for Geyser Land, which invoked the chronotype of the train narrative, is encouraged to move about on a moving train, and is thus doubly mobile. Likewise, the audience in RFK in EKY, akin to the campaign narrative, was encouraged not only to move with the RFK motorcade from Vortex to Fleming-Neon to Hazard but also to mingle with one another during the various stops along the way. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, we were encouraged to come and go as we pleased, to lie down on the beds, rest or sleep, walk around, to close our eyes and dream. Such forms of circulation, as David Wiles writes, “play upon the spectator’s sense of lived time.”³³ These events are not only itinerant in the locational sense, journeying us through spaces, from one place to another, but also in their time dimension, either traveling multiple time periods in the here and now, or enabling us to feel different rhythms of time simultaneously. Of course, movement through space is always temporal, in the sense that it takes actual time—a precise measurable unit of duration in which one can get from place A to place B—which is why the “mobility turn” in Wilkie’s language is one that necessarily implicates the temporal. Audience mobilities, the circulation of audiences, are thus already temporal structures that get laid over a number of mobilities. These include historical mobilities—RFK moving across Appalachia, tourists moving across Yellowstone—but also more metaphorical mobilities, like Cohen-Cruz’s feeling of time travel, as well as my own sensation in *Red Chamber* of moving from being fully awake, to drowsing off, no longer knowing whether I was dreaming or not. I had the constant sensation that time was suspended. There are also literal (and negative) mobilities, such as the displacement of native populations to make way for the railroad, which Geyser Land emphasizes, as well as immobilities, blocked social mobilities, and a lack of access to upward mobility, a theme concurrent in both RFK in EKY and Geyser Land.

Temporal sites are thus spaces where time is moved: activated, revisited, and questioned, but also moved to a standstill. They are both material (the actual location as it is preserved, such as a childhood home, Dealey Plaza, a battlefield, crime scene, etc.), and immaterial (in the sense that they are created by the interaction of a spectator/participant in that space). The temporal sites created in and by performance are both temporary—ephemeral, in the moment—and permanent, since they may change how we view and/or remember a site’s relationship to its history. Joseph Roach, in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, shows how embodied memory, the doing of acts with one’s body, what he terms “kinesis,” can rewrite the course of history as it is remembered. These acts of surrogation, how a culture reproduces and re-creates itself, thus alter collective memory.³⁴ Whereas the Montana Pass of Geyser Land and the southeastern Kentucky region of RFK in EKY are “fixed” geographical sites, these performances rendered them (temporarily) mobile by orchestrating interactive, immersive, and itinerant theatrical devices that embodied, and therefore generated, an elasticity of time. *Dream of the Red Chamber* moved its audience to an alternative consciousness of being “in time.” In these performances, audiences circulate, their movement is choreographed in time: they are moved, not moved, lulled to sleep, or left to roam, all of which have specific political implications—insofar as these movements—or lack thereof—invoke specific temporal sites that, as Schneider suggests with performance art and war reenactments, counter the linear, nostalgic clock narrative and call instead for a criticality, a remaking, a re-creation, a possibility of seeing not necessarily again, but anew. With this focus on ways of moving and moving bodies in and through space, then, we can now turn to how these performances moved us, temporally speaking.

Time Moves in Multiple Directions at Once

As soon as audiences boarded the spacious passenger train in Geyser Land, they were readily placed in a position of leisure. Strom and Carlson established the spectators' role as tourists from the onset, encouraging them to move around the train and circulate like the travelers from decades ago, as had been the original intention set by the train's architecture. The audience heard the following message when they entered the train: The Northern Pacific had the new American passenger cars that completely differed from European compartmentalized cars. The cars were wide open and designed to allow passengers a great deal of mobility during the trip. They were encouraged to move around, to change seats, to sit with someone new. A traveler was free to go and sit down next to whomever they liked and to change places again and again. So, we encourage you to move around the train during the next hour.³⁵ This active role was critical for engaging audiences not so much as voyeurs to the past, but as tourists aware of a constructed narrative.