Tim Crouch's 'Transplant': *ENGLAND*'s Performing Narrative in Art Galleries

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Abstract
Among the many contemporary playwrights who have paid attention both to existing collection and gallery spaces and museum motifs, Tim Crouch is undoubtedly one of the most interesting. The idea of the collection is deeply embedded in *ENGLAND* (2007), not only because the story involves a Dutch-American art dealer, and contains many references to the art world, but also because it revolves around a coincidence between the space of theatre and gallery, and a symbolic interchange between the two, raising provocative questions about their role in contemporary society. As a matter of fact, Crouch's dramaturgical practices hinge on a creative engagement with relationships between theatre and art gallery, storytelling and performance, and mark a transition from play-writing to theatre-making. Conceived as "a play for galleries", *ENGLAND* uses the art gallery as a laboratory for experimenting with the interaction between modes of storytelling, performance and exhibition in order to attempt to give the audience a greater sense of its own authority.

Key-words: Tim Crouch, British contemporary theatre, Young British Art, White Cube.

1. A play for galleries

Understandable and enjoyable at different levels by different kinds of spectators, who can generally and approximately be defined as people with "high cultural capital" (Delgado-García 2015: 171) – even though they don't need any to follow –, *ENGLAND* also speaks to a precise kind of ideal spectator. Indeed, I would suggest that Crouch, who always carefully considers the place of the audience in his performances, addresses an élite, which not only fully appreciates both the narration's references to contemporary artists and the artworks exhibited in the gallery where the performance takes place, but is interested enough in issues regarding the world

of contemporary art to recognise the theatre-maker's dialogue with Brian O'Doherthy and to have possibly read his influential essays on the White Cube gallery space (O'Doherthy 1999). Crouch challenges the contemporary visual artists on their own ground by placing dirty, pulsating life at the centre of an ideal, awe-inspiring white cube. Such dirty pulsating life, he claims, should be the stuff of theatre (Crouch 2009). Besides, in contrast to the White Cube gallery's signification of *emptiness*, Crouch's narration offers a profusion and complexity of references. Indeed, by placing them in the middle of an interaction between his pre-determined text and the actual (and therefore un-determined) performance he makes his spectators experience a *fullness*.

Crouch's movement between drama and art and his indebtedness both to metatheatrical and post-Brechtian tradition, as well as to conceptual art and Fluxus is now part of the critical lore (Bottoms 2009; Morin 2011; Delgado-García 2014). Besides, much attention has been paid to the fact that *ENGLAND*'s process of signification is indissolubly linked to its performance and site-specificity, to the complex relationships between performer, art and spectator[1]. As Delgado-García contends in her analysis, Crouch's "explicit critique of materialistic individuality and exploitation", a "reminder of our obliviousness to structural inequalities" and "reformulation of subjectivity" are "not only expressed thematically through plot, but also embedded in the design of the audience's sensorial and affective experience of the performance event" (Delgado-García 2015: 152, 156). Less attention has thus far been paid to his widely documented intention "to promote spectators' imaginative, intellectual and ethical implication in the work" (Delgado-García 2014: 70) on the one hand, and his faith in engaging audiences through storytelling on the other; this led to the creation of a virtual art gallery, which spectators might make up and visualise in their minds. Not only

[1] Beside *ENGLAND*, other plays by Crouch have been performed in galleries and museums. Since its opening at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in August 2003, *My Arm* has been performed around the world in numerous venues, from the Hayward Gallery in London to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, from the Tate Modern to the Metropolitan Arts Space in Tokyo. Inspired by Michael Craig-Martin's artwork consisting in a glass of water given the caption *An Oak Tree* (2005), the play of the same name was staged at the East Room at the Tate Modern in May 2006.

does Crouch stage the performance of his storytelling in the middle of an art exhibition, thus including the art exhibition itself within his play, but he also creates a world of artistic references which invisibly stir the audience's imagination. It is my contention that, as the stage hypnotist in *An Oak Tree* (2005) who leads his actors and spectators to believe that a girl is a tree, Crouch accurately chooses the words to invite his spectators to use their imagination to see with their "mind's eye" (Bottom 2011: 447) the gallery he conjures up, whose invisible artworks are perhaps of pivotal importance to the interpretation of his play. Thus, on the one hand, the two actors lead the visitors/spectators through the space of the gallery hosting that particular performance, explaining to them the history of that space – in the case of the première, the Edinburgh Fruitmarket Gallery (Crouch 2007: 13-14) – and introducing the artist of that particular performance – for the première it was Alex Hartley (pp. 32-33). On the other hand, they also guide them through the space of a virtual gallery they are encouraged to imagine. Visitors/spectators therefore find themselves at the centre of a complex intertextual experience which is intended to make them take a stance not only during the performance (in a gallery one sees, comments and moves around) but also on the empire of "transmigrations and transplantations", which *ENGLAND* is about (Delgado-García 2015: 179).

Setting the play in a gallery means that each and every visitor may feel encouraged to question the possible links between the performance and the artworks exhibited, according to his/her own prior experience, interests, values and background knowledge (Falk and Dierking 2013). Undeniably, each particular location gives rise to an immediate dialogue with the gallery collections and displays as well as modifies the dynamics of the performance by affecting the spectator's perception (Bottoms 2011: 447; Smith 2011: 424; Cavecchi 2012), as the playwright explains in an unpublished interview with Stephen Bottoms:

> In Pittsburgh, at the Andy Warhol Museum, the energy of Warhol was infusing the show – the notion of commodity, of reproduction, of commercial value. In Yale, we were at the Yale Center for British Art, with Turners and Constables, and in the second act was a room full of Stubbs. Horses and lions! So there was a huge weight of establishment and imperialism which is ideal for the second act of the show. We're not

wanting to force these associations or connections, but hoping that people will get them in the nature of the space. (Bottoms 2011: 448)

Thus, at the play's premiere at the Edinburgh Fruitmarket Gallery in 2007, at the time hosting the solo exhibition of British artist Alex Hartley, spectators might have supposed a sort of connection between the post-heart-operation new life described in the play and the name of "new world" the artist gave to the new Arctic island off Norway he discovered in 2004 (Crouch 2007: 32-33). In front of the work of this leading artist, spectators might have connected Crouch's investigation of the architectural structure of art galleries, hospitals and churches with Hartley's new ways of physically experiencing and thinking about constructed surroundings. In the wake of Delgado-García's remarks about the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, where *ENGLAND* was performed in 2008 within the exhibition *The Violet Hour*, one might therefore interpret the architectural transformations that have brought the original "fruit and vegetable market [built] in 1938" (Crouch 2007: 14) to a contemporary art gallery as "the first leg of a pervasive parallelism between architecture and human lives" (Delgado-García 2015: 162). This relies, she adds, "not only on the motif of structural changes to buildings and subjects, but is also a common indicator of the relationship between capital, appearance and permanence. As the play will demonstrate, enjoying financial support and being considered of value go hand in hand with the very possibility of a flourishing existence. This is the experience of the Henry Art Gallery [and I would add of the Edinburgh Fruitmarket Gallery, too] and that of the English protagonist, but not of the supposed heart donor, Hassan" (p. 162).

Interestingly, the Henry Art Gallery's blog promotes *ENGLAND* as a tour of the exhibition "spinning into an intensely personal narrative that resonates beautifully with *The Violet Hour*" (2008), and guides the spectators on possible associations between the play and the exhibition:

The performers move fluidly through the gallery, utilizing the work on display to stunning effect: Matthew Day Jackson's *Missing Link (x-ray)* looming in the background while they talk of surgery and his *Chariot II (I Like America and America Likes Me)* hauntingly present and transporting the audience to distant places, and Jen Liu's *Testament of*

1368: Light-burst of the End serving as a majestic alter in the face of death. The experience of standing in the galleries and engaging with the work, enhanced by Tim Crouch's lyrical text and effective sound design by Dan Jones, was a transformative experience. The actors allude to Henry Associate Curator Sara Krajewski's text on *The Violet Hour*, "art about a twilight time that may be our immediate future," that illuminates moments in ENGLAND with an added visual and emotional depth, and brings the evocative ideas of the exhibition to the present moment through this live performance[2]. (2008)

As director of Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery Fiona Bradley noted, "the play complemented and illuminated the works in the gallery, turning audiences for theatre into audiences for art and back again every night"[3], as theatrical performance and gallery situation overlap and come to coincide with the two actors (a woman and a man, often Crouch himself, who take turns speaking, even though both share the same narrative voice) cast as guides leading the audience on a gallery tour, while the audience is cast as gallery spectators, standing, watching and walking as the performers move around the space and are involved in the multiple layers of viewing: viewing theatre and viewing visual art, looking at art and at other viewers, too. Furthermore, the rhythm of the performance changes according to the space it takes place in, for example among the huge, monumental sculptures by Arnaldo Pomodoro in the Italian production at Milan's Fondazione Pomodoro, directed by Carlo Cerciello in 2008, or among Isa Genzken's mirrors and reflective surfaces refracting the viewer's body onto the artist's work in London's Whitechapel Gallery, where *ENGLAND* was presented in collaboration with the National Theatre in 2009 (Cavecchi 2011). Finally, as Francisco Frazão, co-producer for *ENGLAND* in Lisbon, wrote in the playbill for the Whitechapel Gallery production, "the show changes noticeably every night as the audience arrange themselves in distinct fluid patterns which the actors attempt to contain, drawing lines and sculpting space with their moving bodies" (Crouch 2009).

[2] "Art is Deadly: Tim Crouch's ENGLAND and *The Violet Hour*", 15 Sep. 2008, https://hankblog.wordpress.com/2008/09/15/art-is-deadly-tim-crouchs-england-and-the-violet-hour/, last accessed January 15, 2018.

[3] http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/shows-2/england/booking-info, last accessed January 15, 2018.

Look Look! Look! Indeed, the frequent appeal to look, with its "distinctively Hogarthian accent" (Laudando 2011: 204), offers multiple invitations for the viewers/spectators to engage both with the current exhibition but also with another immaterial gallery made up of recurring references to artworks and urges them to delve into the reasons for the very carefully tailored name-dropping: Marcus Taylor, Gregory Crewdson, Gary Hume, Marc Quinn, Tacita Dean, De Kooning, Raoul Dufy, David Hockney and Georges Seurat. It is obviously no coincidence that all these invisible/immaterial references to visual art should appear throughout the play; indeed, even though so far not much academic attention has been paid to this intertextual web of referencing, it is easy to appreciate what a large role it plays in determining so much of Crouch's textual and theatrical practice.

2. Is the gallery a white cube in the spectators' mind?

From *My Arm* (2003) onwards, Crouch has attempted "to provoke questions about the qualitative distinctions between viewing theatre and viewing visual art" (Crouch 2003: 10), and between "the social nature of watching a play and the private, stand-alone nature of looking at a painting" (p. 10). The point of departure is the realisation that, as an actor, he has "often worked far too hard 'to host' an audience's journey through a play; something visual art rarely does. Visual art expects its viewers to work hard" (p. 10). His performances should therefore be interpreted in the wake of a museum practice that runs from display to experience, "from quiet contemplation of authoritative interpretation to active participation that implies the collaborative production of meaning(s)" (Bennett 2013: 60). Indeed, nowadays theatre and museums share common ground, and Crouch seems to follow the increasing tendency to use the traditional museum or gallery as a site of artists' interventions where viewers are brought to "experience" the work of art (Serota 1996). "I am very excited," he explains, "about liberating the authority of the audience to see their own thing. For me that's very important: it's about relinquishing control from the stage" (qtd. in Bottoms 2009: 67).

In *ENGLAND* the play takes place in a gallery, which, according to the theatre-maker, has "to remain a gallery and not to be transformed into a theatre":

you come to a gallery, and in the process of being in a gallery, we start to take you somewhere else, not through material transformation, not through sets, not through anything like that, but through language, through text. (qtd. in Ilter 2011: 402)

In fact, in spite of his deep interest in the visual arts, Crouch declares he is "passionate about words" and about "the universes they can create in the audience's heads" (qtd. in Svich 2006). In *ENGLAND*, whose main action consists in the act of speaking, Crouch disseminates his disturbing story of transactions and translations with many traces of visual arts in a sheer seriality that suggests the accumulation typical of galleries or museums. Far from the antiseptic, other-wordly, white and clean space of that white cube described by Brian O'Doherty, this virtual and invisible gallery resonates deeply with theatre, displaying artworks which appear not to disdain what Crouch in this forward to *ENGLAND's* playbill calls "the mortal and infected mayhem of everyday life" (Crouch 2009).

It is interesting then that some of the painters belonging to the lead characters' personal collection are painters of the Young British Art generation, such as, Marc Quinn, Gary Hume, and Tacita Dean (Crouch 2007: 17-8), who contributed to *Sensation*, Charles Saatchi's controversial exhibition at the Royal Academy in the autumn of 1997. Primarily, this short catalogue provides an implicit characterisation of the audience, their names only meaningful to those of the cosmopolitan élite who know the contemporary art world or, even more specifically, London's contemporary art world[4]. They might detect a *fil rouge* interweaving the two actors' storytelling of disease and decay with the works of the artists they evoke. The action mostly takes place in hospitals and private clinics. Furtheremore, signs of decay and death penetrate the two characters' lives and words, far beyond the symptoms of the protagonist's heart disease, and creep into the two guides' tale of disease, mainly by means of allusions to the art of Young British Artists. As soon as the story of the character's illness develops one might be encouraged (as indeed I was) to rethink the collection in the light of all these artists's engagement with what Norman Rosenthal has defined "metaphors of sensations"

[4] It is also important to remember that derogatory UK tabloid press coverage was an important component of YBAs' success even among the general public.

(Rosenthal *et al.* 1997: 11) and their preoccupation with the body's extreme fragility (Dillon 2012: 21). It suffices here to mention Mark Quinn's meditation on identity and mortality *Self* (1991), a sculpture of his head made with his own frozen blood, or his marble statue of phocomelic British artist *Alison Lepper* which was displayed on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square (2005-7). Gary Hume's suite of paintings resembling hospital swing doors come also to mind: their highly lacquered and reflective surfaces put the viewer both inside and outside the institutional doors, perhaps to convey the idea of transit from health to illness and death (Rosenthal *et al.* 1997: 199).

The two protagonists also own a work by Gregory Crewdson, the American photographer who is represented by the White Cube gallery in London in whose photographic series, *Twilight*, displayed at Hoxton Square in 2002, in which "threat and danger intermingle with a bucolic sense of suburban bliss"[5], we catch a glimpse of the lives of the two protagonits. Their "favourite", however, is a Marcus Taylor. "His colours are amazing" (Crouch 2007: 17-18), they say, and this clue might lead spectators (it certainly led me) to think of his colour field canvases, inspired by Rothko, whose edges are completely painted, creating the artworks' own frame, and of his "constant search of beautiful experiences created by intimate interactions"[6] between the canvas and the viewer – an interaction Crouch himself is very interested in.

The finest piece in the couple's collection is a small study by abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, "one of the most famous American painters in the world" (Crouch 2007: 19). "The painting is unfinished from a series of two studies for a canvas he did in 1952" (p. 19) and is worth a million pounds. In this case, the emphasis is both on the great value of the piece, which is more than twice the amount paid at auction in 1995 by a Swiss collector (p. 19), and the laws of the market, according to which "it's always good to buy art just before the artist dies, because after they die it goes up in value" (p. 19). Not surprisingly, by focusing on the commodification of art and

[5] Gregory Crewdson, *Twilight* (19 April-18 May 2002 White Cube, Hoxton Square), http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/gregory_crewdson_twilight_hoxton_square_2002/, last accessed January 15, 2018.

[6] https://www.artebooking.com/en/richard.marcustaylor/statement, last accessed January 15, 2018.

the exploitation of others in art's name (an issue at the core not only of *ENGLAND*, but also of *My Arm* (2003) and *Adler & Gibb* (2014)), albeit incidentally, Crouch offers his spectators the opportunity to question the legacy of contemporary art, torn between creativity and the market in a world where the gallery space plays a crucial role in the process of endorsement and where, in fact, the gallery is *the* space of legitimation (Thompson 2008). As Delgado-García rightly notes, the gallery, with its "concealed and undesired participation in capitalism and inequality, and its aura of immutability regardless of political and historical changes, is therefore a suitable stage for *ENGLAND*'s thinking about the invisibility of injustice, elitism, and the arguable universal pleasure of art as/and commodity" (Delgado-García 2015: 170-71). Furthermore, the reference to de Kooning highlights the link between art and death, once again unveiling the unstable and contradictory nature of contemporary art, at the same time "deadly" and "healing". On the one hand, the two actors/guides are less concerned with de Kooning's art than with his Alzheimer's disease and the possible connection between his illness and the lead in the paint he used. "Art is deadly!" (Crouch 2007: 19), they conclude, even though there is no actual evidence for this fatal link (Clark, Tanner, White 1996). On the other hand, they invite the audience to imagine sitting in a cardiology waiting room and to consider how "artworks can bring many therapeutic benefits to patients, visitors and staff within a hospital environment" (p. 36) and to recognise "the importance of art in recuperation and contemplation" (p. 30). Guy's Hospital has an art trail that connects the works of art in the hospital with information about the artists and the therapeutic benefits of art in health. On the walls of a clinic in the royal county of Berkshire hang "a genuine Bridget Riley, a Damien Hirst spin painting, and a photograph by Sam Taylor-Wood" (p. 25), while on the walls of the doctor's surgery hang prints by Raoul Dufy, David Hockney and Seurat. Even if there is no explicit reference to particular art pieces, except Hirst's spin paintings, one might suppose that this collection is inspired by an interest in colour therapy as well as in the interaction between forms and colours. From Bridget Riley's elementary shapes, lines, circles, curves, and squares triggering optical vibrations and illusions that draw the viewer in, to French Fauvist painter Raoul Dufy's colourful, decorative style; from George Seurat's painted stippling

creating harmony and balanced emotions, as he explains in his letter to Maurice Beaubourg in 1890, to the godfather of British art David Hockney's vivid world of swimming pools, sunshine, palm trees and luxurious living (a way of life not dissimilar from the one led by the two protagonists of Crouch's play). These artworks Crouch hints at are part of a collection which is intended to help patients recover faster. "The patients like to look at the paintings. It helps them to feel better about their illnesses" (p. 25), and also to "feel better about going to die. It can make you live longer!" (p. 30).

A special section of the gallery could be dedicated to Damien Hirst, the most prominent member of the group of YBA, a media icon who has "permeated the cultural consciousness of our times" (Gallagher 2012: 11). This time, the protagonist explicitly quotes Hirst's spin paintings, the series marked by bright colours and elongated titles, starting with "Beautiful". It is precisely this adjective that catalyses the connection between the paintings and the play, in which "beautiful" is a recurring adjective that qualifies the life of the two protagonists, their pieces of art and environment: the space of the gallery, inside Southwark Cathedral, the atrium of London's Guy's Hospital[7]. But beyond the spin paintings, the reference to Hirst might work in more indirect but perhaps more meaningful ways, since the theatre-maker's descriptions of hospitals as aesthetised and anaesthetised spaces, where there are no traces of blood or flesh (Crouch 2007: 43), remind the spectator of Hirst's cabinet series, where his display of pills, bottles, surgical tools, skeletons and anatomical models in pharmacy medicine cabinets combines the morbid issues of physical vulnerability with "a certain queasy glamour that attaches to medical technology" (Dillon 2012: 28). It is starting from this contiguity (or overlapping) of images of "aseptic" hospitals and "anesthetized" galleries that the theatre-maker questions the status of theatre as a place engaging and

[7] I would also go as far as to recall a 1996 exhibition, *No Sense of Absolute Corruption*, at the New York Gagosian Gallery, where the spin paintings were made to rotate mechanically on the wall, thus implying that movement is essential to the success of the work and also that "the moment they stop, they start to rot and stink" (Hirst 2012) and to suggest that in a way Hirst's colourful and beautiful spin paintings hide the same sense of decay that sweeps away the beautiful but fragile lives of the two protagonists in *ENGLAND*.

questioning real life, where, on the contrary, "the outside world must […] come in" (O'Doherty 1999: 15). Referring explicitly to O'Doherty, he writes:

> Some galleries should have antiseptic hand wash dispensers outside their entrances. Their aesthetics are so clean and other-worldly that they appear to disdain the mortal and infected mayhem of everyday life – and this before we've even looked at the art. I feel the same about churches... and of course, hospitals […] Theatre, I think, is less capable of such clean immortal lines. Its raw material is less controlled, more prone to disease. I never feel I need to wash my hands before I see a play. (Crouch 2009)

It is therefore perhaps significant that, even though the narration repeatedly draws the audience's attention to the aesthetic elements that characterise the White Cube gallery as well as hospitals and even churches (Crouch 2007: 26) – white walls, clean lines, an almost sacramental silence – the recurring references to artists and artworks beyond those actually exhibited in the gallery end up recalling an aesthetics of accumulation that ultimately challenges the minimalism of the White Cube.

Relevantly, in the programme for the 2009 production at London's Whitechapel Gallery, Crouch quotes Marcel Duchamp's "art coefficient" between the "unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed", and acknowledges that "inside both theatre and visual art exists the chaotic element of the audience and the unpredictability of its reception" (Crouch 2009). Indeed, the artworks by the artists the two guides refer to are conjured up in the spectators' minds through their storytelling (and are therefore obviously guided if not controlled by Crouch's authorship)[8] but also through the spectators' recollections and associations, which are obviously dependent on their own fields of interest and knowledge and cannot be totally controlled by the playwright. *ENGLAND* is a performance where the spectators' imagination is stirred to the nth degree and called to interpret signs and clues referring simultaneusly to different visual levels. For each and every spectator a swift reference to an artist or a piece of artwork becomes the centre

[8] In *An Oak Tree* (2005), likewise, Crouch "structures events that cultivate indeterminacy within carefully determined limits" (Love 2017: 58).

of a very complex reception dynamic and a path "in the forests of things, acts and signs that confront or surround" him/her (Rancière 2011: 16). Furthermore, from gallery to gallery, the invisible and immaterial exhibition the spectators are guided through by the two actors/guides interacts with the artworks exhibited in the space where the performance takes place.

It is possible that the spectators may fail to perceive or understand all of Crouch's references, but, conversely, thanks to the nature of the play itself, they create their own connections, according to the theatre-maker's "ethical and political commitment to distributing a sense of agency and collective responsibility among all those involved in a performance" (Belloli 2016: 10). It does not mean, however, that Crouch is renouncing control over the theatrical event, but rather that his authorship plays with a delicate balance between determination and indeterminacy and offers "multiple and sometimes contradictory layers of representation to provide an opening for the spectator's interpretations" (Love 2017: 58). Thus, as Lane rightly suggests, Crouch's theatre "expects the audience to invest in an act of creative *construction*, rather than creative response" (Lane 2010: 139, original emphasis).

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