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# PHOENIX TEST FLIGHT: DEVELOPING INTERACTIVE THEATRE EXPERIENCES

Aarhus 2012, Report by Thomas Rosendal Nielsen



*"The phoenix theme – the bird that burns and is resurrected – is used in the project as a symbol of daring to live fully. To let unimportant and limiting things perish, to rise again from the ashes and to dare fly with one's greatest dreams. Do we dare to unfold our full color spectrum, or do we live only as a shadow of ourselves?" (Mette Aakjær)*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This report sums up the conclusions drawn from the two week artistic research project on interactive theatre experiences, *Phoenix Test Flight*, which took place in Aarhus (DK) from the 20<sup>th</sup> of August to the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2012. The project was organized by Mette Aakjær (f. 1973), creative director of Wunderland, and joined by 11 other performers and artists. Approximately 50 audience-“travellers” participated in the experiments during the test period.

The group works with a type of interactive theatre that aims to create intimate, sensorial and challenging encounters between the audience-participant and the performer/theatrical framing. The aim of the performative encounters is to disturb and enhance the audience-participants perception, imagination and self-consciousness. The groups work “site-specific”, and fictionality is employed as a means of transportation and as a way of instigating a heightened awareness, rather than as a way of delimiting another world to be explored or narrated. *Phoenix Test Flight* is an experimental project that works with a more manifest and radical agenda than the regular performances, based on the following research questions:

The main research questions for the workshop as stated by Aakjær were:

1. How to create an experience that makes every audience-member/traveller go through his or her personal fear (meet his/her shadow).
2. How to create an experience that makes them feel their dreams (their feeling of what to give while being alive)?

(Appendix b)

In addition to these internally motivated research questions, another can be added by the research observer:

3. What kind of poetics (i.e. foundation for artistic practise) is sketched out by the performed experiments and what kind of challenges and opportunities does this raise for further development of the genre?

This report in turn presents the facts of the project, the strategy of analysis of the observer, the observations based on the research questions and finally sums up the conclusions.

## II. FACTS

- Place:** *The Phoenix Test Flight* took place at the harbour in Aarhus (starting point: Fiskerivej 12, Aarhus) and with at base at the “By-i-By-project” at Bispetorv, Aarhus.
- Programme:** The group worked in the period 20<sup>th</sup> August to 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2012 with presentations for test-audiences the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> of august, and the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. A public presentation (video) and discussion of the work was made at the Junge Hunde-festival in Aarhus, Bora Bora, Godsbanen, the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2012.
- Participants:** Cindy Rudel (Germany) performer, Nina Matthis (Sweden/Serbia) performer, Mette Aakjær (Denmark)performer, Thoranna Bjornsdottir (Iceland) composer, Sigrid Astrup (Norway) visual consultant, Rune Brink (Denmark) technical innovation, Sarah John (Australia) performer and dramaturg, Sonja Thomsen (Denmark) writer, Helga Rosenfeldt-Olsen (Denmark) performer, Karin Bergstrand (Sweden) performer, Ine Camilla Bjørnsten (Norway) performer, Barbara Simonsen (Denmark) consultant and performer.
- Cooperation:** The project was coproduced by Bora Bora, the scene for dance and visual theatre in Aarhus, and supported by the Bora Bora Laboratory for performing arts research and development and the Department for Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University.
- Funding:** Kunststyrelsens Internationale Udveksling, Aarhus Kommunes Kulturudviklingspulje, Kongelig Norsk Ambassade.

### III. STRATEGY OF ANALYSIS

#### MATERIAL

The primary material for the report is the researchers first hand observations from participating as test audience in three out of four of the scheduled presentations. The observations were recorded in a research log immediately after the presentations. As supplementary material is the project description (appendix a) and research questions produced by Mette Aakjær before the project (appendix b) and the notes from a conversation held with Mette Aakjær after the project, concerning the responses from the test audience and her own evaluation of the project. The test audience were interviewed by the performers (more or less individually) after their “journey”, but no systematic compilation of responses was made.

#### METHOD AND FOCI OF OBSERVATION

The method of participatory observation followed the guidelines presented in Nielsen 2011a. The foci of observation were the three research questions stated above. The observations were generally (qua the material) directed against the framing of the communication more than against individual psychological/experiential responses. I have not tried to create a unifying overview of the created material, neither during the project as a whole or during the particular “journeys” or montages in the presentation. This kind of performance is “anti-synoptic” (Lehmann 2005) in its form – no audience member can get a totalizing or generalizing overview of what happens – so instead I have arranged the analysis and presentation of the material in this report as carefully chosen examples of the measures developed and tested to answer the research questions. I have identified five such measures, described below.

#### THEORETICAL PREMISES

The primary theoretical foundation for the observations is the model of analysis developed in my ph.d.-dissertation, *Interactive dramaturgies in a systems theoretical perspective* (Nielsen 2011a). Supplementary theories are quoted and listed under section VII. References.



## IV. RESEARCH QUESTION 1+2: FEARS AND DREAMS

1. How to create an experience that makes every audience-member/traveller go through his or her personal fear (meet his/her shadow).
2. How to create an experience that makes them feel their dreams (their feeling of what to give while being alive)?

These two questions, pointed out as the main questions in the framing of the experiments (appendix b), both concern the possibility of meeting each individual audience-participant on the deepest personal and psychological level in order to make them become conscious of their own driving impulses – negative or positive. In this section of the report, I will exemplify and discuss how and to what extent the solutions created during the project answered the questions by outlining what I observe as recurring and pivotal means of evoking the fear and dreams of the audience-participants in the experiments. (The list is not comprehensive of course). The observations are conditioned by the limitations described in chapter III and thus primarily relate to the framing of the experiences (communication) more than to the experiences themselves (consciousness).

### OBSERVATION NR. 1: THE CREATION OF LIMINAL SPACE

The site itself evokes what anthropology and performance theory describes as a liminal space (Turner 1982, Schechner 2003): a place betwixt-and-between identities, states, realities, worlds etc. The old harbour for wood boats is at the same time a closed environment with its own “tribe” of inhabitants and an open gate – a threshold to the world. It has the reek of adventure and travel and it opens itself towards the vast space beyond, but it is at the same time full of closed and locked spaces and people doing their own “secret” business; practising a lifestyle and a culture that might seem unfamiliar and even exotic to a stranger to the docs.

The performative journeys that connect the individual experiments of the phoenix-project utilise and enhance this experience of liminality in two ways: 1) In the beginning of the journeys, the traveller (audience-participant) is given a pair of headphones and is placed on a chair. He then listens to a short poetic text starting with “You are on an edge...” The text unfolds a metaphor for being temporarily in-between identities. The text establishes a situation of vulnerability and a need for sensitivity, and it points to a possibility for personal transformation. 2) The route between the “stations” of the performative journey makes the traveller move between small/indoor/private and vast/exterior/public spaces and thus intensifies the perception of the different qualities and limits of the spaces; an effect that echoes in the constant shifts between introspection and physical movement facilitated by the performance.



## OBSERVATION NR. 2: THE USE OF BASIC SPATIAL METAPHORS

Another measure of connecting to the fears and dreams of the traveller is the use of very basic spatial metaphors as frames of action and as thematic pointers. A few examples: First of all the constant presence of water/the sea. Water conventionally symbolises birth and genesis (the primordial sea, the embryonic state), dreams and the subconscious, but also death and destruction: the undifferentiated state from which everything grows and returns. It has the double meaning of purity and clarity on the one hand and depth and mystery on the other. The sea is something that at the same time divides and connects the world. Water/the sea thus serves as a primary metaphor for the travel between birth and death (and rebirth, cf. the Phoenix myth), and between levels of consciousness.

The metaphor is amplified at some of the stations: e.g. at one station, the traveller is led to a chair facing the waterfront, from which he can watch a tableau of the docks framed by the masts of two nearby boats. From a nearby bridge outside the frame, a performer waves him over, and he is placed on his knees at the end of the bridge with the face towards the dirty and opaque water surface. The performer gives him a rope that leads into the water and signals him to pull. She withdraws, the traveller pulls, maybe feeling the suspense of what hides beneath the surface, and at a sudden moment, the opaque surface of the water is transformed into the deep space of the sea, as something – a small bucket with a mirror at the bottom – emerges in the deep below. It is an obvious interpretation to see this mirror as the emergence of the self from the

subconscious deep. The action is interrupted by a pump making noise and disturbing the surface of the water, just as the mirror-self is raised above the surface.

The station following this small scene is another example of the physical-spatial metaphor, not drawing on the water symbol, but on the cargo hold – the “cellar” of the ship. Another deep and dark place, the cellar is “the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes in subterranean forces” (Bachelard 1994, p. 18) – and also there, the traveller/dreamer is “in harmony with the irrationality of the depths” (ibid.). The traveller is led from the bridge aboard the nearest boat and is told to go down the stairs at the one end of the ship and bring back something at the other end, hurrying back. As the traveller enters deeper into the body of the boat, it becomes darker, narrower, filled with obstacles, almost impenetrable. Maybe he bruises himself trying to crawl through the pipes and bars comprising the skeleton of the ship. At the farthest end he finds an oblong, thin object that later reveals to be another mirror shard. But as the traveller turns back towards the light, he finds his way blocked by a shadowy figure. Only after confronting this shadow (another alter ego) – gently, cunningly or by force – he can climb back to the surface.

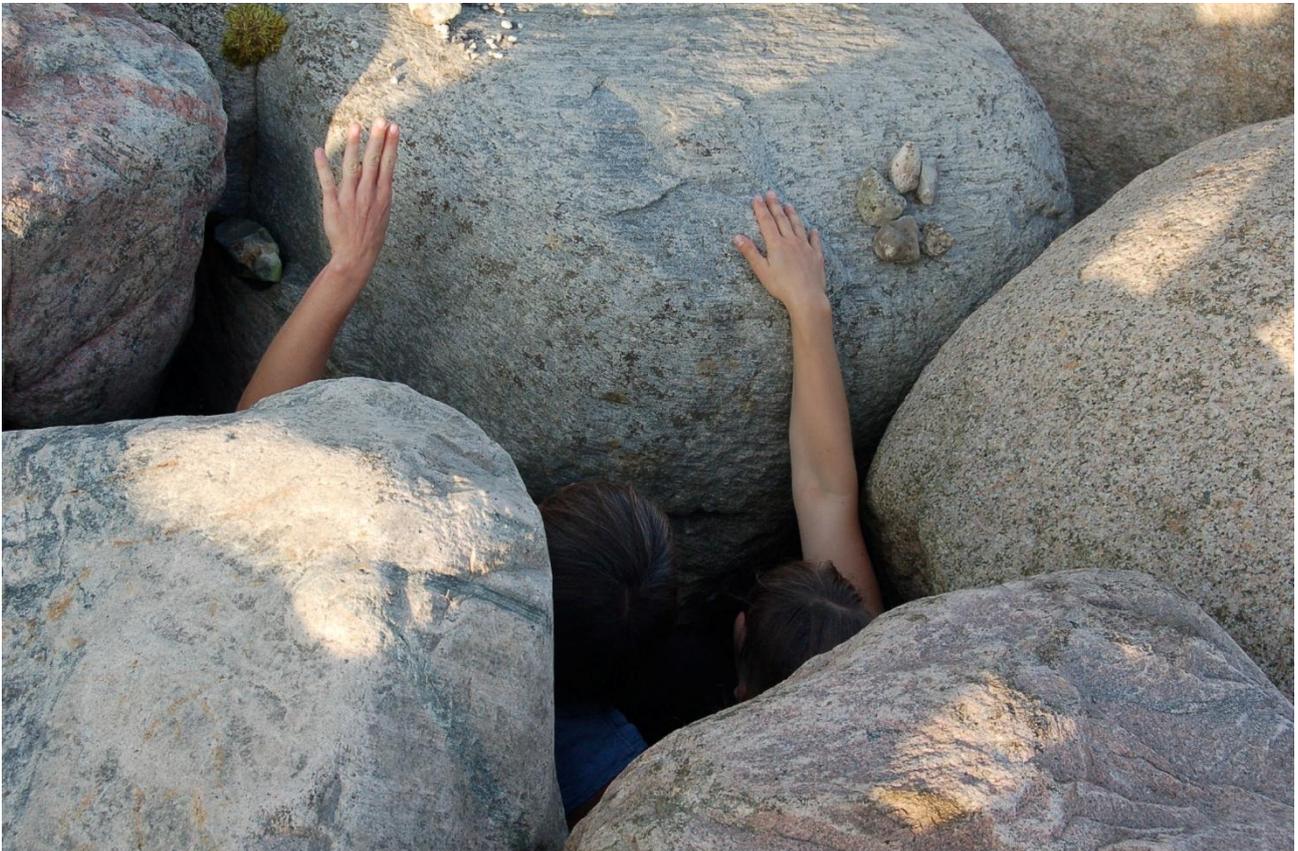


### OBSERVATION NR. 3: THE OTHER AS “UNHEIMLICH MIRROR IMAGE” OR “SECRET PLAY MATE”

The scene above also exemplifies the third measure of answering the two main research questions – the one that has to do with the role of the performers. With a few exceptions, the performers don’t play any characters; neither do they reveal much about themselves as persons. They serve either as plain and simple guides or as what I would call bodies of projection for two thematic functions corresponding respectively to the fear and dream theme: “the unheimlich mirror image” and “the secret playmate” – sometimes a transformation happens from the one to the other. The scene described above is an obvious example of the

first function, and I will add just one example that combines the two with the emphasis on “the secret playmate”.

Again the traveller is told to walk to the other end of the docks and sit on a chair facing the waterfront. A performer emerges behind a scrub bounding a small beach from the harbour. She makes the traveller follow her through the scrubs and makes him take off his shoes and put on a blindfold. Thus vulnerable and in the hands of a stranger he is taken through a few physical games with different levels of energy. Dancing on the sand holding each other’s hands, dabbling in the water blindfolded, then finally led crawling into something that appears to be a very small tent. Sitting close together in the tent, the blindfold is removed, and to the maybe uncanny and estranging surprise of the traveller, the secret playmate is now wearing a half-mask. She tells him a story of a dream and asks the traveller, if he will be her friend. The games then continue outside the tent, drawing and digging in the sand, finding mirror shards and animal bones beneath the sand and nearby boulders, until the traveller is sent away.

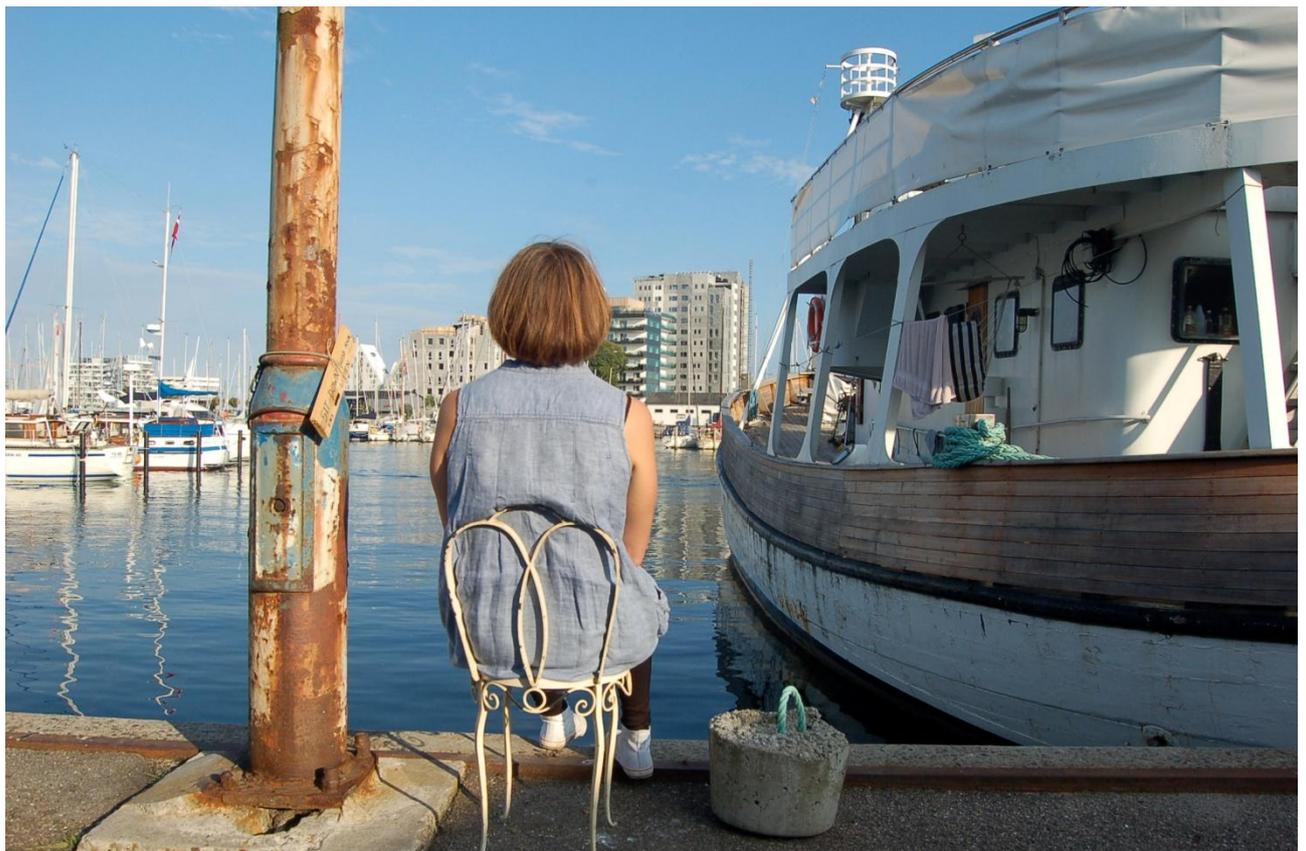


#### OBSERVATION NR. 4: THE UNSETTLING OF THE BODY

This leads us to the description of the next observed measure of evoking the audience-participants’ fears and dreams, namely the way the traveller’s body is activated, made vulnerable, put off balance, exposed, gently transgressed etc. through the challenges of the journey.

At one station the travellers are invited to play perilous games of jumping and running from boulder to boulder together with a performer. At another station, the travellers are prompted by a recorded voice to do different verbal task such as making voices, singing, shouting and thereby revealing themselves to themselves in the dark space – and perhaps to (the imagination of) an unseen observer. Later they are instructed to make contact to a performer sitting on the roof outside the dark space by shouting, and the performer tries to provoke the traveller to shout louder and louder, stressing his voice and transgressing any eventual (and common) shyness of using the voice outside it's normal mode and range. At a third station the traveller finds a performer inside the back of an old, broken van. She invites him or her to sit in front of her in silence (both carrying earmuffs), and she starts caressing the face of the traveller, insisting that the gesture be returned. The caressing becomes more crude turns into nipping and evolves into a playful but nevertheless aggressive wrestling fight. The scene ends with the performer and the traveller climbing the top of the van, jumping and making noise together, in front of the surprised and sometimes affronted passers-by.

These different ways of stressing and exposing the body of the traveller (or maybe more precisely the traveller *as* body-consciousness) at a first level stimulates a more focused perceptual awareness and attention to the traveller's immediate surroundings. On a second level the exposure provokes an unsettling self-consciousness that can take the form of both anxiety and trust.



## OBSERVATION NR. 5: THE USE OF AUDIO-TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE “INNER VOICES”

The last measure I will discuss here is the use of audio-technology (primarily voice recordings and headphones) to “penetrate” the body of the traveller and create different kinds of “inner voices”. The introductory text quoted earlier, “You are on an edge”, could be heard as an inner narrator or even as an inner monologue (with a self-reflexive distance implied in the second person pronoun), and this convention is expanded on in some of the other experiments.

In the scene with the van mentioned above, before the traveller meets the performer, she is given headphones that guides her through different reflections and actions in relation to the crashed car, culminating in a situation where she has to crouch into the big dent in front of the car, imagining being hit as she hears a very loud sound of a crash in the headphones. In another scene she is guided by the inner voice through a narrow corridor with different stations, prompted in chronological order to imagine different periods of her life and watch small corresponding installations in the corridor; from childhood towards death – symbolised of course in the concrete space by the light at the end of the tunnel and the water seen beyond. And at yet another station a complete other form of deep and chaotic inner voice is evoked as the traveller hears sounds transmitted from a microphone placed beneath the surface of the sea.

### CONCLUSION (QUESTIONS 1 + 2):

In general, the experiments answer the two questions by applying aesthetic strategies that penetrate and expose the body and provoke concentrated attention and self-reflection. The dramaturgy is constantly connecting and reversing inside and outside events through spatial metaphors and through the performers’ shifting roles as alter egos or as observers that trigger introspection. The first research question seems to have become the dominating one, subsuming the theme of dreams to the role of gateway or counterpoint to the exploration of the fear theme.

The extent to which the journeys make the travellers go through their *personal* fears can be discussed. The scenes evoke basic fears such as the fear of being trapped, the fear of falling, the fear of being watched, the fear of death, the fear of darkness, the fear of losing control/the subconscious etc., but there is no systematic observation or use of the audience-participants’ personal biography in the dramaturgy of the experiments. Of course the situations *can* trigger more individual fears – either by coincidence or by the personal investment of the audience-participant. E.g. one audience member responded in the interview after the journey that a number mentioned in a story told by one of the performers and recurring in “the corridor of life”-scene corresponded to the age she had been foretold to die, and that she thus had a “near-death experience”.

To explore the possibility of evoking individual fears would probably require the development of some sort of feedback mechanism that invites the travellers to disclose personal information which could then be fed into the dramaturgy at a later point. This might raise some ethical questions on how far you want to go in penetrating the lives, minds and bodies of the audience. At the level presented here, none of the audience members interviewed gave the impression of having been violated or traumatized by anything in the experience, though some chose not to enter certain scenes. Aakjær herself expresses that she thinks the group has reached an appropriate line with many of the scenes, and that she is surprised of how far people are willing to go and how playful their involvement has been. The pragmatic challenge might be how to

create flexibility in the dramaturgy so that it becomes possible for those who want to go deeper than others, and still provide a rich and complete experience for everyone.



## V. RESEARCH QUESTION 3: POETICS

3. What kind of poetics (i.e. foundation for artistic practise) is sketched out by the performed experiments and what kind of challenges and opportunities does this raise for further development of the genre?

This final research question addresses the material from further distance in order to point out what the artistic values of the given practise are, and what kind of paths for future development that are lined out by the present practise in the landscape of other comparable practises.

It might be obvious that one of the core values of this subgenre of interactive theatre is the possibility of stimulating self-reflection by creating alternative ways of perceiving and relating to the world. A form of self-reflection that transcends everyday consciousness. The performative journeys are in a way “grand tours” offering what the Danish philosopher Lars-Henrik Schmidt calls a self-assuring self-transcendence (selvforsikrende selvoverskridelse).

The dramaturgy displaces conventional distances and reverses institutionalised hierarchies between mind and body, self and other, self and self, and thus makes a space (a “crack”) for the creation of a knowledge/intuition/perception that cannot find an adequate expression in verbal language. In this way it distinguishes itself from other poetics of “Bildung” where the self-transcendence is based on a very stable (re)production of distances (the most obvious example is perhaps theatre in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht, but actually it also applies to the whole tradition of bourgeois theatre that Brecht revolted against). This is also the controversial part of the poetics – because the steady distance between the artist and the audience mediated by the “work of art” is the precondition for the intellectual form of emancipation favoured in “conventional theatre”. By displacing distances, another form of emancipation and growth is made possible, but at the same time it evokes a range of ethical questions known from the fields of education and therapy (cf. Ranciere 2009), because the audience itself suddenly becomes the material to be transformed through the creative process.

The pivotal question for further development of this poetics is probably how far to go down this path of a theatre of self-consciousness. It is, I believe, the distinguishing mark of this project – not only in comparison with “conventional theatre”, but also in relation to more similar forms of interactive theatre, where the transcendence is less directed towards self-reflection, and more towards e.g. “the specific human other” (Cantabile2), “the universe” (Carte Blanche), “the unsayable” (Teatro de los Sentidos) etc. (cf. Nielsen 2011c). It shall be interesting to see the bird “unfold it’s full color spectrum” even more in the future.



## VI. SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- The *Phoenix Test Flight* applies aesthetic strategies that penetrate and expose the body and provoke concentrated attention and self-reflection in order to make the audience-participant connect to their fears and dreams.
- Five elements of such strategies are:
  - a. The creation of liminal spaces – i.e. spaces for personal transformation – esp. between the conscious and the subconscious symbolised by water/the sea.
  - b. The use of basic spatial metaphors that connect and reverse inside and outside events.
  - c. The performer functioning as an alter ego of the audience participant in the form of either an “unheimlich mirror image” or a “secret playmate”.
  - d. The physical unsettling of the participants’ bodies through tasks involving exposure, small risks and small transgressions.
  - e. The mental penetration of the participants’ bodies with the help of audio-technology that creates “inner voices”.
- The first research question seems to have become the dominating one, subsuming the theme of dreams to the role of gateway or counterpoint to the exploration of the fear theme.
- The experiments evoke basic fears such as the fear of being trapped, the fear of falling, the fear of being watched, the fear of death, the fear of darkness, the fear of losing control/of the subconscious etc., but there is no systematic use of fears connected to the audience-participants’ personal biography.
- The poetics of the work points to a “theatre of self-consciousness” (for the audience-participant) that works with a displacement of distances and a reversal of oppositions between mind and body, self and other, self and self.
- The pragmatic challenge for further work might be how to create a flexibility that allows some to go deeper into their fears/dreams than others, but still provide a rich and complete experience for everyone.

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## VIII. APPENDIX

- a. Project Description: Phoenix Test Flight
- b. Questions for Phoenix Test Flight