

Theatre as Installation in the Syndemic Architectures of Rimini Protokoll and Battersea Arts Centre

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(fig. 1).

A single audience member opens the door to the *probebühne* or rehearsal stage as instructed by a voice over binaural headphones that then pronounces "*Aktion!*" This entrance, compelled by the language of film, is the "action" of the performance. The spoken direction continues in German, "close-up of the stage model." Visitors approach a black model box on a white table in the middle of the studio to assume the required perspective. The miniature theatre is dark. "I will switch on the light," the commentator advises, and the replicated stage is lit. A figurine is positioned center stage. This statuette should be interpreted, we understand from the specific context of the event within which this scene occurs, first presented in 2020 under the title *Black Box: Phantom Theatre for 1 Person* by Berlin-based company Rimini Protokoll, not as an actor but a spectator.¹ The figurine stands on a representation of the representational platform on which participants, later in the performance, also will stand. It is a template visitor encountering the stage not as a delineated space wherein actors perform, but as a location to be entered and interpreted—in short, as installation. For now, spectators view the representation of the stage as if outside the proscenium, and yet an image pasted on the back wall of the model box depicts another house (in the theatrical sense) of red velvet stalls and gilded loges. It is not clear yet, at least to those of us unfamiliar with *this* theatre, whether the image depicts the "real" auditorium of the venue, although its position at the back of the stage, with the figurine facing away from it, encourages its identification rather as the design for a façade printed to look like the part of a theatre where the audience traditionally sits. Here, then, the space of the theatre given over to the audience is trebled. It is where visitors look from, crouched backstage in front of the model box; it is the imaged scenery presenting an illusory space for theatregoers on the cyclorama; and it is the stage where the proto-spectator stands. The stage is, apart from this placeholder, empty. The auditorium pictured on the scenic backdrop is also without human occupants. The model theatre might appear to be exhibited pre-show, but the lights are on and the performance has started; we must read this emptiness instead as (post)-pandemic theatre.

Throughout *Black Box*, visitors follow the guidance of the narrator and move, as directed, around the front of house, backstage, and performance spaces of the venue where the production is staged. The German-language text cited and translated in this essay is taken from an iteration of the performance produced at the Schauspiel Stuttgart in 2021. By ordering spectators to focus directly on the materiality and infrastructure of such sites, large public arts centers are made to function as installations. Theatre venues themselves become the thing to which we are given to attend and thus are reconceived as intricate sculptural environments re-presented for display. In this recapitulation, the areas of each building made available to theatregoers are extended to include functional atelier

and rehearsal stages beyond the auditorium. *Black Box* thus makes apparent the different levels of prestige afforded to a variety of theatrical roles by drawing attention to the physical and operational structures of theatre's institutions. Despite these apparent expansions of accreditation and access, clear spoken directives resolutely dictate how and where visitors should stop and look. "My instructions are your soundtrack," the narrator asserts and they also determine the route: "You sit on the black chair" or "Stand up and go where the light implies a stage."² These constraints respond to and develop from contemporary guidelines on social distancing that regulate cultural and communal events in the situation of pandemic. It is these restrictions that first compelled cofounder of Rimini Protokoll Stefan Kaegi to produce a show for a sequence of individual spectators who move in turn along a pre-designated route, following an audio-guided tour. In *Black Box*, pandemic controls on the physical arrangement of bodies are played out through the cinematic mode of the single shot. Spectators are instructed to act as cameras and replicate the continuous and subjective perspective of this genre in a way that exposes the agency-illusion of most immersive theatre practices. Even when spectators are permitted to move and gaze around a given space more at will, our experience is, of course, programmed. The rules of pandemic life underline these existing institutional choreographies. Pandemic circumstances require a reorientation of our arts venues and encounters that is not only enacted physically. Events such as *Black Box* encourage visitors to reflect not just on how we find our way around a specific building, but how we orientate ourselves in relation to cultural institutions and the particular set of historical and social formations they represent and reproduce.³

Definitions of installation art most often center the embodied experience of the participant. What is more useful, perhaps, in an essay concerned with drawing connections between pandemic mandates of social distancing and creative practices that restage theatre's existing architectures as installation, are theories that foreground not only physical presence, but also altered positions and perspectives of the spectator and on the institution. In her book *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (2008), Jennifer González tracks, via a 1969 catalog essay by curator Jennifer Licht, how installation art "redefines the spatial condition of art's reception."⁴ What González points to in her interpretation is a bilateral reimagining that shifts not just the perspectival relationship between spectator and artwork, but also the fundamental arrangement of the institution that constitutes the spatial and conceptual situation of encounter. As a determining social context rather than selected artistic strategy, syndemic conditions also radically alter the form of cultural interactions. In this essay, the term *syndemic* is preferred to the more ubiquitous *pandemic*, since it connotes the political and socioeconomic biases of infection. Syndemic interrelates structural inequalities and systems of biological contagion to emphasise that our lived (and fatal) experiences of pandemic are racialized and inequitable.⁵ The syndemic drastically changes the possibilities of performance. Theatrical events are transformed, first by the closure of arts venues, and then, as

institutions reopen under revised restrictions, by the requirement that a determined interspace be maintained between participants—in the UK, two metres. Such regulations reduce venue capacities, limiting the number of attendees at live performances, as does the reality that participation at in-person events remains unsafe for certain communities. Syndemic behavioral directives, as theatre theorist Sharon Aronson-Lehavi also observes, "challenge some of the defining and fundamental cornerstones of theatre and performance" expressed in terms of presence, sociality, intimacy, and embodiment.⁶ To resume with social distancing, theatre must, then, be reshaped. While installation art challenges strict adherence to conventional rules that govern proximities of engagement, it also provides, as González recognizes, after artist Michael Asher, an "aesthetic system that reorganises predetermined elements found within an institutional framework."⁷ Installation art offers a pertinent form for navigating emergency controls and re-determining theatrical conditions (post)-syndemic. (fig. 2).

Exhibiting theatre's buildings as installations opens up contemporary and historicizable perspectives on the institutional. This essay explores how theatrical architectures are refigured by performances developed in response to the remote and virtual imperatives of syndemic, and what those reconfigurations might mean for theatre's ontology now. The "foundations for our 'new' online realities" were, of course, as theatre scholar Carol Martin points out, already operating pre-syndemic in practices of documentation and digital production.⁸ Recent modes of immersive scenography and technological and sonic experimentation reveal how artists have taken up certain existing methodologies and pushed them toward "forms of invention" in response to the challenges of syndemic, as well as how these modes, which often involve a "blending of different types of mediums, can be the material for theatre going forward."⁹ Alongside *Black Box*, I will also make reference to *The Way Out* (2020), a digital theatrical tour directed and co-written by British filmmaker Suri Krishnamma and produced by London's Battersea Arts Centre (BAC). *The Way Out* was broadcast in collaboration with Arts Council England as part of the BBC's "Culture in Quarantine" program and thus promoted as an example of cultural production made in lockdown—the state of isolation instituted by governments internationally as a protective measure against the spread of COVID-19—that commenced in the UK in March 2020. In fact, the film was shot two months earlier, in January 2020, as an antiracist response to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. *The Way Out* thus came to be associated with the syndemic retrospectively, when the creative team observed that the two main characters maintain a distance from each other, as well as the ensemble of featured artists, "eerily close to the 2-metre restrictions that were just becoming our 'new normal'" (see figure 2).¹⁰ The fact that *The Way Out* can be read with hindsight as syndemic art makes clear that creative work produced during this period has specific qualities, not

least to do with the physical ordering of bodies, that affect not only current and future creative processes, but also how we review installational work from the past.

In the situation of syndemic, practices and structures that might otherwise have "escaped attention" have, Martin observes, "come around again to capture our imaginations."¹¹ As well as revealing long-standing biases and exclusions, working at distance broadens and revitalizes recent trends toward more experimental means of theatrical production and exchange that are digital, aural, and installational. *The Way Out* stands here as an example of one of the routes that the proposed arguments about the theatrical aesthetics of syndemic culture might follow through and beyond these conditions. The current state of emergency will, as Heike Roms expresses, "hopefully, be temporary; but the impact it is having on our understanding of what performance is and what it does, and how it can be learned, transferred and shared, may prove lasting."¹² Certainly, retaining lessons drawn from the innovations of theatre's virtual iterations and the installational forms of its physically distanced modes is preferable to any too-easy return to a privileged and elitist canon of plays produced post-syndemic. In times of crisis there is often great artistic experimentation, and it seems imperative for theatre to remain self-reflective as the opportunity to occupy physical venues at capacity again becomes a possibility. Reminding us that the model of sitting collectively in the dark is a modern one, the "detached proximity that digital technology is so adept at simulating" has been vital to theatre's survival.¹³ Digital connection enables renewed appreciation of performance as, what Roms calls, a "creative approach to remoteness, rather than as an ontology of co-presence," on which future practices might be mounted.¹⁴ Via a formal device shared with *Black Box*, *The Way Out* ironically offers a way in to Battersea Arts Centre. It stages a digital visit that employs a "single camera to create the feel of immersive theatrical performance."¹⁵ This strategy of constructed immediacy represents exactly the sort of resourceful experimentation with distance that Roms attributes as a definitive quality of performance. Cinematic techniques of one-take filming are used by both productions to expose and negotiate institutional contexts as disorientating. By taking up installational devices that foreground the spatial conditions of encounter, theatre begins to articulate some of the reorientations demanded by syndemic life and how these develop new directions in the material practices of making, attending, and being together with performance.

Physical Distancing and Aesthetics of "Emptiness"

Installation is a mode of creative production particularly relevant to theatre practice not least because, as Paul Allain and Jen Harvie gloss in their definition of installational form, it "often indisputably is performance."¹⁶ The status of installation as performance arises either from the inclusion of performers, usually though not always the artists, as component parts within the artwork or from the way in which the installational site is staged as a scenographic space wherein

visitors might perform. If installation art has long been characterized as theatrical, not least since Michael Fried's influential critique of minimalist sculpture as situational and durational (1967), this essay proposes that contemporary performance-makers are, in syndemic, reciprocally reconceiving theatre spaces as installational.¹⁷ There are of course evident distinctions between installational forms and more traditional configurations of theatrical space. Installation is not, as media theorist Margaret Morse has spelled out, a "proscenium art."¹⁸ Inviting visitors not only to cross the fourth wall, an incitement well-established in postdramatic theatre, but also to travel beyond the remit of the stage into the functional and transitional areas of each venue, *Black Box* encourages participants to engage with an expanded repertoire of theatrical spaces as installational environments. Rimini Protokoll is one of a number of contemporary theatre companies working across performance and installation. "While they make use of the proscenium stage" in *Black Box*, Rimini Protokoll also draw, as performance scholar Shannon Jackson notes of earlier works in the company's oeuvre, on "other forms—site-specific installation, sculpture, architecture, and video—to expand or redistribute the effects of theatrical engagement."¹⁹ What is compelling in both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* is the way in which aural and filmic techniques are employed to navigate distancing protocols and render whole theatrical institutions as installations. In syndemic, such approaches offer not only the means by which to enter virtually arts venues temporarily closed, as in *The Way Out*, or enable individual experiences possible in the early stages of cultural reopening, as in *Black Box*. Beyond such practicalities, these coincident events enact a self-critical examination of theatre's properties and projects by reconfiguring conventional and constructed arrangements of its institutional spaces.

Giving attention to fundamentals of theatre and installation, this essay thinks against long-standing misnomers frequently used to describe traditions central to the intersection of these modes, and the conceptualization of the arenas wherein these forms are performed. The installational, as rehearsed through syndemic practices, affords an addressing of theatre's histories and futures not accounted for by obscuring terms such as the tabula rasa, empty stage, black box, and white cube. Foregrounding buildings rather than shows or performers and accenting specifically how spectators are ordered to engage with these sites, productions that render the theatre as installation highlight the physical-material premises and representational tools of the theatre, as well as its institutional legacies and structures of power. The reconception of theatres as installations during and post-syndemic necessarily commences from logistical attention to the situation and possibility of the audience. In compelling practitioners and producers to reassess conceptual ideas of emptiness and consider again how spectators can encounter events of performance, the context of syndemic works to align health-related distancing protocols with longstanding postdramatic experimentations in spectatorship and related priorities in installation art. To take an indicative high-profile example of

the ways in which the syndemic initiates acts of spectatorial reconfiguration, in September 2020 the Berliner Ensemble removed 70 percent of the seating from its nineteenth-century Theater am Schiffbauerdamm to comply with Germany's social-distancing policies. This rearrangement left alternate rows unfurnished and spaced out remaining seats individually or in pairs. Commenting on this "extraordinary seating plan," artistic director Oliver Reese observed that the "auditorium now looks like an installation."²⁰ Made spacious and sculptural, the stalls take on, albeit temporarily, the appearance of a constructed exhibit. Designs premised on exigencies of public health become legible aesthetically via reference to conventions of installation art. In the same interview, Reese dissociates from the subtext of affective disconnection inherent to the term "social" distancing, preferring to signal compliance with the "rules of physical distancing."²¹ The imperative here is audience safety, conferred via a corporeal separation that does not prohibit social connection.

In her writing about ecological design, cultural scenographer Rachel Hann posits three ways in which performance might joyfully interweave humans, things, and places. Each proposition is also applicable to (post)-syndemic theatre and will be discussed at intervals throughout this essay. In one statement, Hann affirms that ecoscenography moves beyond ocular-centric approaches to performance so that "rather than asking about the look of a production, the question [becomes] 'does this place feel healthy?'"²² This question is fundamental for theatre audiences in the situation of and post-syndemic. "Health is a criterion for scenographic practice" both ecologically, as Hann suggests, and in discerning how to make theatre in syndemic conditions. As explicated at its most fundamental through the above example of the Berliner Ensemble, within the context of health-oriented design structures installation art provides a framework through which constraints aimed at disease prevention become theatrically legible. Vision-centric cultures of performance have undoubtedly, as Hann writes, produced criteria that "privilege certain aesthetics, of newness, clean lines, virgin materials, and so on."²³ Certainly there is, as I have argued throughout my work at the intersection of performance and the visual arts, an enduring connection between the theatrical fallacy of the empty stage and the museological misconception of the modernist white cube, which is particularly germane to the emergency closure of arts venues in syndemic circumstances.²⁴ As an illusion that works to obscure the historical and cultural specificity of arts institutions, the fiction of the tabula rasa comes, in the situation of syndemic, to resonate "beyond any mirage of neutrality to vitalities of sanitation and human frailty."²⁵ Further, in concealing systemic and violent acts of acquisition and exclusion, the empty space is, as Hann articulates in her ecoscenographic proposals, a "colonial concept" intimately connected to racist "histories of 'discovering' seemingly empty spaces."²⁶ The long-challenged concept of the theatre as "empty space"—epitomized, as Hann also signals, by the black-box model—is revised anew by the different forms of occupation necessary in syndemic.

As a company long invested in "questioning the demarcations that have often separated social and aesthetic practice," Rimini Protokoll are well situated to address the formal and ethical challenges of (post)-syndemic theatre.²⁷ Inviting visitors to follow an audio-structured exploration of a public arts center one at a time, commencing at five-minute intervals, Kaegi's *Black Box* draws attention to the deceptive illusion of vacancy signaled by its title. The venue seems to be "empty," but another spectator precedes and follows each participant in turn, and the abandoned spaces that are toured underline the absence of their often-overlooked occupant-makers. If the white cube feigns neutrality, *Black Box* points to the ways in which "theatre-black" is conceived as representing invisibility and actions and performers that the audience "should not actually see," as in the black-clothed stage hands that cultural convention instructs spectators to disregard.²⁸ Setting out to reveal the mechanisms of theatrical illusion, if not to call to account directly the racist connotations of such categorizations of potentiality and erasure, the production asks "where are the others?" and explores how in "times of social distancing and isolation, the question of community arises."²⁹ The complexity of how to be together post-syndemic demands urgent inquiry. Opening out from the hermetic *Black Box* into a wider set of theatrical scenes and practices, Rimini Protokoll's show, as well as *The Way Out*, unfolds contemporary approaches to performance by laying bare theatre's historic processes. Theatres are preoccupied with conventions, expectations, past productions, and their residua. In *Black Box*, the "deserted foyer, the stage, the light control room, develop the charm of ruins."³⁰ By attending to the theatrical pasts of its venues, *Black Box* proposes alternative engagements, but as one reviewer articulates, whether this reflective "preoccupation with theater is itself theater remains to be seen."³¹ The metatheatrical productions of syndemic explore how theatre might approach both its historicity and futurity. *The Way Out* is also a "theatrical adventure" that commences from, and critiques the illusion of, a "seemingly empty building."³² The architecture is distinctive; it is the Victorian town hall that houses one of London's experimental and community-focused performance spaces. Since February 2020, Battersea Arts Centre has situated itself as the "world's first Relaxed Venue," working against barriers to participation maintained by ostracizing programs, architectural layouts, advance information, and traditional conceptualizations and etiquettes.³³ The closure of theatre's buildings forces us to conceive their accessibility anew. As theorist Daniel Sack writes, by confronting the "limit cases of a theatrical event," in this case its prohibition, "one might come closer to understanding what theatre in its broadest conception can be and do."³⁴

The prologue to Sack's collection of *Imagined Theatres* (2017) resonates with the scene from *Black Box* described at the start of this essay, beginning likewise with a figure approaching a miniature stage and the conjecture that we "want to take it apart . . . to get the essence of the theatre, even if [we] know it's a quixotic venture."³⁵ The theatre "keeps imagining itself anew," imaging

itself anew, and this need not, as Sack writes, be a "matter of disruption"; in the situation of syndemic in particular it might be a "gesture of conservation or repair."³⁶ Taking the theatre apart and engaging with its venues in new configurations, (post)-syndemic performance, as the press release for *Black Box* asserts, might offer a "clear view of what theater was, is, and can be."³⁷ This possibility of transparency is vital for theatre's futures. Questions about building use, accessibility, and sustainability, and community, participation, and atomization, are bolstered by syndemic circumstances; the constraints of public-health regulations prompt creative and exploratory approaches to these key theatrical challenges. Priorities of sanitary safety and practicality come before visual and conceptual proclivities in the instigation of theatre's recent practices, and this reordering reveals exclusions and obscurations in theatre's historical formations and processes—to do with who can attend and present in theatre's extant spaces and how these representational sites and apparatuses are maintained and arranged—that require serious attention. The reality of syndemic closures exposes the misjudgment of theoretical notions of "emptiness" that preserve racist epistemologies and worldviews that center misleading aesthetic conventions. An affordance of syndemic theatre is genuine experimentation with how we participate in performance events. Physical distancing does not preclude collective engagement, but rather offers an opportunity to play out theatrically, and with high stakes, who has access to cultural institutions and which components of these operations and venues in particular.³⁸ How do we encounter and mark the absence of others in the theatre? In remote models, as Guillermo Gómez-Peña asks, is "my isolation a privilege?"³⁹ Can we hold on to ways of being together necessitated by rules of distancing that make visible enduring and often-concealed disparities across experience, opportunity, and representation?

Syndemic Sanctions and Theatre as Installation

"The theatres have been empty for months. Performances in front of filled halls are prohibited until further notice," and this circumstance demands, as Rimini Protokoll heed, an experimental response from creative practitioners.⁴⁰ It necessitates "quick adjustment to new kinds of personal and social behavioural modes, which accelerate cultural change," as well as, borrowing Aronson's terms, the "quick adaptation" of our theatrical approaches.⁴¹ At the same time, syndemic regulations replicate historical categorizations that have served to divide arts practices across distinctive venues with idiosyncratic protocols. Conventional configurations of audiences, which see spectators seated in proximity in the theatre and mobile in the museum, mean that arts institutions are subject to diverging restrictions. Kaegi is alert to the disparity that, unlike communal assemblies in theatre auditoria, "exhibition visits by individuals are allowed" and thus determined "let's turn the black box theatre into a white cube museum and make it exhibit itself."⁴² In exceptional circumstances,

the theatre, as Sack proposes, "looks, listens, feels outward from the immediate to discover what could be."⁴³ In syndemic, what theatre "could be" is installational. To make a theatre into an exhibit is to reposition arts venues and conceive them beyond their function as spaces that house creative productions. Instead, the constituent spaces of theatre's buildings become the thing on which we are asked to focus. The syndemic puts the institution of theatre on display. It highlights the precarity of an industry reliant upon freelance workers and physical, experiential encounters. Based in Berlin, Rimini Protokoll investigate theatre's institutions from a context wherein, as Jens Roselt detailed in 2015, Germany's Staatstheater and Freies Theater are increasingly asked to justify their respective forms of subsidy. As an independent company that often co-produce with municipal venues, Rimini Protokoll are indicative of how pre-syndemic funding pressures led to a "blurring of boundaries" between traditional and experimental approaches, as well as across discrepancies of security offered by "the hierarchical division of labour in municipal theatres" and short-term freelance contracts.⁴⁴ By drawing attention to theatre's makers beyond the stage, *Black Box* exposes such inequities and the threat posed by syndemic for particular communities of workers. The conditions of syndemic not only underline existing inequalities, but also, as Roms expresses, have an affect on the "future of performance to be practiced at all and on the personal futures of those who practise it."⁴⁵

Theatre will not, the narrator expresses in *Black Box*, "survive in texts and books," since "theater is space, scent, adrenaline, community."⁴⁶ The solution proposed by Rimini Protokoll in this piece—to transform the "black box theatre into a white cube museum"—risks reinforcing, albeit with some inversion, long-standing conventions for artistic encounters. Turning to the "white cube" for its theatrical model—a framework that is, as González reminds us, "exhibition standard for contemporary arts spaces"—*Black Box* makes clear that what is often at stake in curatorial and cultural practices, is the "preservation of interpretive frames."⁴⁷ By contrast, installation art seeks to expand and interpolate the structures that shape creative experiences. Theatre's restaging of itself as exhibition, or installation, arises not only in a time of syndemic, but also of increased attention to performance from theatre's counterpoint, the art museum.⁴⁸ Live programs have become more prevalent in galleries during this century. Performance is thus resituated in relation to what Director of Program at Tate Modern, Catherine Wood, calls the "object histories of expanded sculpture, action painting and immersive installation."⁴⁹ Theatre's shift to installation calls on a form reciprocally embedded in performance histories. Installation, as art theorist Claire Bishop affirms in her critical history, is a mode often described as "theatrical," which draws on influences from "architecture, cinema, performance art, sculpture, theatre, set design, curating, land art and painting."⁵⁰ Performance art, as a distinctive strand of embodied art-making emerging in the 1960s, is always already installational, just as installation is entangled with performance practices. Both fields emerged at a time when "boundaries between art disciplines and media were breaking down

to develop hybrid new forms."⁵¹ As Allain and Harvie précis, installation, like performance, "challenges the institutionalism of much fine art," interrogating galleries that "feign neutrality" and compelling audiences to "reflect on the meanings and histories of its site."⁵² In syndemic, the site-specificity of installation art is transferred to institutional critique and formal experimentation in the theatre. Instead of foregrounding the body of the artist as a way to challenge aesthetic and cultural discriminations and omissions, *Black Box* and *The Way Out* emphasize the materiality of theatre's buildings in order to test out contemporary and future approaches to its forms and institutions. (fig. 3).

In *Black Box*, the voice of the narrator, Sylvana Krappatsch in the version for Schauspiel Stuttgart, dictates the shape of each visitor's individual tour around the theatre. "But today we don't go into the auditorium," the teller instructs, instead "I'll show you another way."⁵³ Following this spoken direction, visitors move from the white cubic forms of the theatre's foyer through invariably white-painted corridors to rehearsal stage, archive, workshop, and wardrobe, always being told where to pause and how to attend: "Sit on the bench as if in front of a picture in the museum."⁵⁴ The tour traces "another way" through theatre's spaces as each spectator proceeds in turn, to take one scene from this particular iteration of the performance, past trolleys and boxes into a red-illuminated space named as "Theatre" by a large-scale neon sign. The word is capitalized, but this area, a low ceilinged section of a larger workshop for scenic painting, is not the main auditorium of the venue. Rather it is a functional backstage space named theatrical first by the installation of this text-based neon artwork, and second by the presence of the spectator within the depths of the theatre building usually behind the scenes. Here, as in Sack's poetic preface, the spectator looks beyond the stage "into what is still the theatre and yet / already becoming not the theatre," so that the limits of the performance space are widened.⁵⁵ As an immersive form, installation often draws attention to its "site and context as a crucial constituent of its meanings."⁵⁶ In *Black Box*, theatre is foregrounded as a form of meaning-making constructed not only live, at the point of production, by a company of performers onstage, but by manifold offstage contributors. In this piece, Kaegi calls on Rimini Protokoll's signature device—centering multiple voices in a "theatre of experts"—to advocate that an expanded set of performance practices be acknowledged and valued against the threat of syndemic circumstances.⁵⁷ The narrator's is not the only voice playing through the headphones; visitors hear also from practitioners "whose lives are connected to these spaces and the idea of theater: makeup artists and prompters, actors and philosophers" whose expressions animate the theatrical recesses wherein many makers execute their labor unobserved.⁵⁸ Normally, a technician affirms in the workshop, everything is done "hidden."⁵⁹ These offstage actors are not physically present, but their aural commentaries ask us to recognize wider environs and activities as theatrical.

What is exhibited in *Black Box* are theatre's functional spaces. Visitors' attentions are not, perhaps with the exception of the previously discussed neon artwork and preliminary model box, drawn to constructed mimetic landscapes. Rather, what is staged is the reality of the working life of the theatre. "Instead of representing texture, space, light and so on," *Black Box*, as Bishop states of installation art more broadly, "presents these elements directly for us to experience."⁶⁰ The theatre reveals its apparatus. Rather than sitting in the auditorium, visitors traverse the broader topography of the venue, encountering each room in turn as a cumulative installational environment. There is, of course, as theatre scholar Marvin Carlson also observes, a "long theatrical tradition of mobile audiences" that has been variously designated as "promenade" and most recently "immersive" theatre, as well as by classifications that invoke the connection of such modes to installation, such as "installation theatre" and "performance installation."⁶¹ Among this plethora of related terms, what leads me to characterize the specific performances of *Black Box* and *The Way Out*, as well as a broader set of practices emerging during and post-syndemic, as installational rather than immersive is precisely the particular attention they bring to the fabric of theatre's structures. What is constructed is not only, or even predominantly, a mode of encounter that immerses audiences within the space of performance, but rather a form that summons the entire theatre building (stage, offstage, backstage, and front of house) as each production's central concern.⁶² "Site and space often appear as key themes" in immersive theatre, performance scholar Adam Alston agrees, but their "importance tends to be secondary to the subject of immersion—which is to say, the audience."⁶³ The emphasis here is not on the construction of an encompassing landscape as scenography for other acts of performance and on the audience's experience of those fabricated sites. Rather, in *Black Box* and *The Way Out*, it is the transformation of the frameworks of arts venues from containers to content that presents a mode of theatre-making akin to installation.

In *Black Box*, as in installational arts practices, the "entire space" of the building is treated as a "single situation into which the viewer enters."⁶⁴ The theatre is put on display not via a selection of exhibits (costumes, props, programs, and other forms of ephemera that populate traditional theatre museums) but in its totality. It is staged, as the narrator describes in *Black Box*, as if it were in a "glass case, as if it were a ritual from another time exhibited in a museum vitrine."⁶⁵ It is from "another time" because the theatre cannot, in syndemic, function according to its previous "ritual" forms. In *Black Box*, the aural narrative, and its background of atmospheric sounds, acts as the means of display that directs our attention to its article of interest, in this case theatre itself.⁶⁶ Within the context of syndemic, theatre venues become objects of curiosity, notable cultural forms to be exhibited and journeyed through. The direction of intent, however, is not only historic, but also, as I have argued throughout this essay, future-oriented, since theatrical forms that turn to installation offer revised models for theatres of the present and beyond. "Methodological mutations" are, Martin

concurr, already happening, and creative ways of "making theatre and producing ideas about what theatre might become are indications of the future."⁶⁷ Both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* are site-responsive in that they attend deeply to the landscapes that shape their narratives, but are unusual in that the locations to which they respond are theatres and that their approaches to these sites are taken from another institutional position—namely, installational methodologies developed in the gallery. This results in a form of production that does not respond to but rethinks its site from the perspective of another institution (the art museum) and mode of production (installation). Such encounters thus exceed "the inadequacy of terms like site-responsive," since they highlight, as James Frieze articulates in *Reframing Immersive Theatre* (2017), that "the ways in which participants are led to engage spatially rarely follows logically from the sites themselves."⁶⁸ In attempting what the speaker in *Black Box* demands in turn from participants, which is to "understand and hold what this was—what took place here"—syndemic forms offer images not only of what theatre has been, but also what it is now and might yet be.⁶⁹ Theatre's incapacity to perform its "rituals" in syndemic exposes its processes as historic, while at the same time opening up forms and practices of futurity that specifically circumvent its limiting structures.

Systemic Exclusions and Installational Dream Scenes

Particular qualities of *Black Box* and *The Way Out* render these productions installational. *Black Box* "completely dispenses with actors," or at least with their in-person presence, and yet, as one reviewer observes, the "theatre as a system is more noticeable in this production than ever before [as] the main role is taken by the multi-storey building," and this results in a "new and surprising view of the theater business."⁷⁰ The perspective of the theatre presented by *Black Box* is automated and mechanized. Kaegi's performance practice has long been, as he articulates in an interview with theatre scholar Peter Boenisch, motivated by "amazement at the machinery, and even at the very idea of theatre."⁷¹ Accordingly, *Black Box* interrogates how much of a theatrical experience can be "technically simulated."⁷² Lights are cued to correspond with the spoken narration and costumes stir animatedly in the wardrobe stores. In her theory, Bishop observes how most often there is "no body on display in these installations," but rather "objects that attest to its presence: the rooms it occupies, the furniture it inhabits, the trinkets that adorn it."⁷³ In *Black Box*, theatrical objects, accompanied by interviews with their related practitioners, make visible acts of backstage labor. In this way, the piece departs from Rimini Protokoll's established practice of centering experts from other fields who may not have a trained "mastery over performance skills."⁷⁴ Instead, it broadens this set of recognized "performance skills" beyond virtuosic acting. Rather than being part of a trend for "nonprofessional" actors, *Black Box* extends ideas of who the "professional" performers in the theatre might be. Visitors encounter the workspaces of technicians, designers, stage managers,

and mechanists, as well as their tools, archives, and gadgets for staging theatrical illusions. Contraptions are revealed that are explicitly designed to simulate life, including a machine that pumps "blood." In this way, visitors are, as Bishop describes as often the case in installation art, "invited to imagine the missing body that is overdetermined by the objects used to signify its absence."⁷⁵ In *Black Box*, the "overdetermined body" is not (only) that of the theatre practitioner, in all their specialist guises. Here, the performing body is displaced and decentered, first by the reports of theatre's other makers, and second by the theatre building itself. It is the "very idea of theatre" that is signified as "overdetermined," previously by its historic conventions and exclusions and anew by syndemic circumstances that require its practitioners to account for and re-determine its processes again.

While *Black Box* employs theatrical mechanisms—automated effects of lighting, sound, smoke, and motion—to stage a dramaturgical encounter for a procession of solitary spectators, *The Way Out* uses the filmic strategy of single-shot production to replicate the durational experience of performance. At the start of the film, a breathless figure runs around the exterior of an institution that we recognize as a theatre and up a ramp to enter the front of the venue. The doors open automatically. The building is animate. Those of us who go to the theatre in London, or did pre-syndemic, know this space. But here onscreen actors stand in our place. Installational form depends, Morse suggests, on the "passage of either the body of the visitor or of conceptual figures through various modes of manifestation—pictorial, sculptural, kinesthetic, aural, and linguistic."⁷⁶ In *The Way Out*, the "conceptual figure," named in the film's credits as an "outsider" and played by Bláithín Mac Gabhann, engages with the theatre as an exhibition environment on our behalf, moving through its corridors to discover installations of actors and objects. In the first of these acts, London-based performer Lucy McCormick is wheeled by on a trolley, trembling, as she is drenched with a watering can by another cast member. The aesthetic is characteristically trashy, and all the workings of the special effects, which might construct a dramatic scene in close-up, are evident as McCormick presents something akin to the live recording of a music video for a song titled *Rain*. These visual trickeries, which fake the song's titular element, are created by means intentionally ordinary (watering can, hose pipe) as make-up streams down McCormick's face. Watching this performance onscreen, the form of *The Way Out* intersects with Bishop's observation that when "human bodies appear in the installations, they do so through a mediating frame that recalls the forms of carefully choreographed display found in the theatre, the cinema, the museum."⁷⁷ Here, the "mediating frame" is designed to encompass more than is expected in the form that McCormick's routine seeks to replicate. We see not only the "desired" shot, but also how it is constructed and the toll it takes on the performer's body. The view of the theatrics is expanded. As *Black Box* extends

the action of performance into functional spaces beyond the stage, so *The Way Out* broadens its viewpoint to include and satirize the working practices of specific mediatized performance genres.

On entering BAC and prior to encountering McCormick's performance, the "outsider" meets first a raconteur, a "guide" dressed in red coat and fedora who leads the way through the beautifully dilapidated spaces of the venue. At first, the outsider is visibly disoriented, seeking to find a way out though perplexed by the convoluted utterances of the guide and doors that, like the industry's persisting glass ceilings, do not open. While the acts staged throughout the building are serious and rigorous—even when, as in McCormick's turn, their aesthetic is purposely otherwise—this compere is agonizingly theatrical. Performed by British actor and comedian Omid Djalili in exactly the sort of histrionic style long disdained by the visual arts world, the guide delivers clichéd paradoxes with pomp and gravitas. His exclamations promise "things here are not as they seem" and vouchsafe "entrances" that will "beguile, entice, enrapture, bewitch, mesmerize."⁷⁸ The sought-after effect is the construction of a wonderland. The guide recalls snippets of *Alice's Adventures*: "I wonder which way I ought to go now, asked Alice." As these words are cited, a turntable begins to play, apparently of its own accord, Roy Orbison's "Candy Colored Clown" (1963) from a small table carefully arranged with a conical lamp, open book, and bottle of bright red liquid. "We're together in dreams" (Orbison). Bishop's theory of installation art foregrounds the experience of the viewer and delineates installational encounters into four modes, which structure her critical history. The first of these categories, the "dream scene," resonates deeply with what is developed through *The Way Out*. While theatres are closed and physical immersion impossible, dreaming once again offers the "closest analogy to our experience of one particular type of installation art."⁷⁹ In *The Way Out* also, as Bishop expresses of other installational projects, spectators "imaginatively project ourselves into an immersive 'scene,'" and specifically the place held for us by the outsider who, until the end of the show at least, also watches from the periphery.⁸⁰ In this way, the dream scene comes to allude further to the delirium of the nowness of syndemic life and to prefigure the sorts of forms and conceits that might be pertinent to emerging forms of in-person theatre (post)-syndemic.

In its construction as an "immersive journey through a labyrinth of rooms and corridors, propelled by performances," *The Way Out* calls upon the intersection of cinematic and theatrical techniques central to installation art to create a filmed version of this genre, which we are invited to interpret as something akin to live performance.⁸¹ Installation art is, Bishop reminds us, "often regarded as being related in some way to the absorptive character of painting, reading and cinema," and yet, in seeking to "trigger fantasies" and "cultural associations," the "symbolically charged 'dream scene' provides the richest and most poignant model of comparison for our experiences of these works."⁸² *The Way Out* speaks to the structure of a dream sequence; it is staged as a series of surreal encounters with an eclectic assemblage of virtuosic performances (song, dance, cabaret,

acrobatics, spoken word). The guide and outsider meet with a sequence of acts that are often carnivalesque, as in the hula-hoop and balancing feats of London-based artists Amazí and Electra. Hosted by queer cabaret company, the Cocoa Butter Club, these performances are spectacular but resolute in their endeavor to celebrate performers of color and, as founder and curator Sadie Sinner states, "clap back to cultural appropriation, lack of representation and imitation, such as black-facing."⁸³ As an institution, BAC is transparent about representation within its operations and programming. The venue publishes statistics wherein the shows for the 2020–21 season (which include events cancelled due to syndemic closures) are listed as 41 percent "black-led" and 41 percent "white-led," with 14 percent of theatre and performance work during this period described as directed by groups "made up of mixed/multiple ethnicities"; 4 percent of the program is credited as "non-black POC-led."⁸⁴ This data signifies a public commitment to inclusivity, antiracism, and organizational change across policy, programming, staff development, and management. Within the context of the Cocoa Butter Club, drag artist Wesley Dykes speaks directly about the cultural and historical exclusions that demand positive action, as well as who is permitted and empowered to take up public space: "You, my friend, are entitled to every measure of oxygen you inhale to exist."⁸⁵ Dyke's focus on inhalation marks the intersection of viral infection and structural racism central to syndemic life. "What another breathes out, I can breathe in," Judith Butler articulates powerfully.⁸⁶ Air is shared and interconnecting; it is central to freedom and survival but also, as we perceive in syndemic, to contagion and threat, denied, as it is, time and again by the systemic racist violence that is permitted and performed by institutions of power: legal, punitive, and cultural.

The situation of syndemic lays bare the "heightened vulnerability to the illness of all those for whom health care is neither accessible nor affordable" due to poverty, displacement, racist deprivation, and other forms judicial, representational, and cultural disenfranchisement.⁸⁷ In syndemic, as Butler sets out, "vulnerability" signals both a "shared condition of social life" and a "greater likelihood of dying, understood as the fatal consequence of a pervasive social inequality."⁸⁸ In *The Way Out*, this duality of vulnerability is related directly to the brutality of forced migration within the context of Brexit, the central subject conveyed by the film's many references to "entrances" and "exits" and amplified by the nationalistic and biopolitical border closures of syndemic. Many of the performers speak to ideas of "home." In the Cocoa Butter Club, Dyke concludes that "there is space for all of us to be," ending on those most theatrical words, "*to be*," which signal so much about existing and exiting in both the theatre and life. In the farthest reaches of Battersea Arts Centre, drag performer Le Gateau Chocolat sits at a cabaret table and serenades us with the promise: "This is where I'm staying. This is my home." Climbing an indigo-lit staircase, poet Caleb Femi sings of one who "saw visions of a new home, new world, new sky so blue its black too."⁸⁹ Installation art sets out to challenge the "visual mastery" of traditional arts practices,

emerging, as Bishop underlines, simultaneously with poststructuralist theories of the subject as "fragmented, multiple and *decentred*—by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures."⁹⁰ Reorienting the positions from which we engage and acknowledging these as predetermined by excluding aesthetic and political systems, installation art seeks to offer what Bishop calls "plural and fragmented vistas" so that any "hierarchical and centred relation to the work of art (and to ourselves) is undermined."⁹¹ Both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* broaden out from the focus of the proscenium or carefully constructed filmic shot to make visible mechanisms—categorical and systemic—that construct and maintain certain perspectives. *Black Box* reveals hierarchies of visibility in theatrical production that allow the labor of some (performers) to be consistently valued over the contributions of others. This ranking is explored organizationally via a revaluation of expert technical skills rather than elaborated through critical attention to race. *The Way Out* goes further to explicitly counter and call out racist omissions, and foreground historically decentred subjects, by staging political performances directed toward inclusion and representation.

Illusions of Agency and Embodied Image-Surrounds

In *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, González also addresses processes of subjection as a central focus, exploring how installations often construct "dreamlike or disorienting environments in order to invite the viewer to identify (or disidentify) with a specific subject position."⁹² Both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* invite spectators to identify or otherwise with distinctive positionalities: in *Black Box*, these are fashioned from theatrical hierarchies; and *The Way Out* contests the xenophobic policies of Brexit Britain and its cultures of production. In the latter, however, it is clear that no matter how many pathways are offered to the "outsider" by the "guide," the structures of relation are predetermined. As is so often the case in the political present, the semblance of possibility is illusory and the "boundless choice of exits and entrances" articulated by the guide and feigned by the convoluted staging of BAC is a discursive fiction. This is a performance filmed in one shot and thus requires careful orchestration. Although visitors physically enter the theatre venue for *Black Box* and engage with an expanded repertoire of its backstage and functional spaces, the routes available are similarly established in advance and carefully controlled. In related ways, the guiding principle of the camera as a framing device in both projects (literally in *The Way Out* and metaphorically in *Black Box*) marks out the agency-illusion of much contemporary theatre. Mobility, Carlson reminds us, is "not the same thing as agency, a distinction often overlooked in the recent rhetoric surrounding the new freedom given to the spectator in immersive theatre."⁹³ In *The Way Out*, spectators are invited to identify with a figure called the "outsider"—a performer pretending to be a visitor and thus able to offer an external perspective on

contemporary cultural and political events—but do not, as is usually a prerequisite in installation art, actually go inside the location on display. Rather, we engage remotely and the camera directs our attention. In *Black Box*, participants tangibly move through the theatre, but again limitations on our gaze are imposed in cinematographic (as well as governmental and health-related) terms.

Installation art has long been integrated with cinematic and other screen-based technologies. If the term "video" in video installation art stands, as Morse suggests, for "contemporary image-culture per se," then the taking up of this mechanism, practically in *The Way Out* and conceptually in *Black Box*, acknowledges the reality that contemporary encounters with cultural environments often pass "through image-culture before rematerializing in three-dimensional space."⁹⁴ This understanding is particularly relevant to *The Way Out*, which offers a virtual representation of the theatre as installation prior to the opportunity to physically enter that same venue as a three-dimensional space when it reopens (post-syndemic). It tests certain possibilities onscreen that might later rematerialize as innovative in-person theatrical forms. "Two and three dimensions interchange freely with each other" as we look at the world everyday through lenses and screens, and so our conceptions of theatre and its potentialities must likewise be rendered via means that appreciate the complex ways in which, following Morse, the "image-surround no longer represents a world apart; it is our world."⁹⁵ This recognition has key implications for the future of immersive installation and performance practices. If installation art has sought to break the frame, then reinserting the camera lens as a means by which to expound art venues as installational offers new ways for perceiving what both theatre and installation can be and do. *The Way Out* and *Black Box* look beyond the proscenium of the stage, but do so by way of other optics. Formal innovation and historical crises often intersect; as Aronson-Lehavi notes, drawing on the terms of expressionist theatre artist Lothar Schreyer, a "turning point in the arts" is a phenomenon of a "turning point in history."⁹⁶ The focus of the single shot redefines art's framing devices not as markers of distinction but as part of the worlds not only that they encapsulate, but also by which they themselves are surrounded. As video art offered what Morse calls a means to "experiment in the redesign of the apparatus that represents our culture to itself," so theatrical experimentation with the device of the single shot provides a framework for representing theatre to itself anew as installation.⁹⁷

(fig. 4).

Filmed as one continuous forty-two-minute take, the endurance of the single shot in *The Way Out* mimics the live experience of theatrical performance and installational events. Free from cuts and visual edits, its durational form makes clear, as film theorist Laura Mulvey highlights, that "cinema is the only medium that has been able to preserve that particular sign of 'now-ness' into the future."⁹⁸ What Mulvey calls the "simplicity and contingency of movement within a single shot" creates a temporal experience akin to that of time passing.⁹⁹ The invitation to read filmic motion in

relation to duration is played out directly within *The Way Out* in a scene wherein choreographer Botis Seva dances alongside a giant hourglass (fig. 4). The sand in this scenic object is not contained, but rather pours unencased onto the wooden floor. The artwork is not delimited by bulb or stage and the effect is installational. Here, the single shot serves both to emphasize theatrical time and shift the containing frame from object to digital screen. Not only the shifting sand that marks the duration of Seva's performance is enclosed. Rather, the frame is expanded to include the performer and the installational space of BAC as the camera marks out the reintegration of "image-surround" and lived experience, particularly during syndemic. Alongside the beat of the music and the performer's body, which contracts and twists, the sound is of sand streaming. This is the marking of space and time key to theatre and installation. The performer dances as the sand floods until he too collapses in a heap. In this setup, it is clear, as film theorist Roger Odin states, that the "single shot is paramount."¹⁰⁰ In syndemic, our daily lives function more than ever through screens, increasing what Odin calls the "inscription of filmic language as an operator in the space of everyday communication." Meeting online and recording impromptu occasions on our mobile devices, we understand, still following Odin, that the position afforded by the single shot is one of "first-person narration" wherein the person filming "forms part of the system of relations."¹⁰¹ The effect of the single shot is immersive, because we recognize and interpret it as a standpoint from which to watch important, and meaningfully ordinary, events. We are oriented to this perspective.

Black Box requires that participants take a certain amount of responsibility for the visual construction of the performance via the format of the single shot, this time embodied. Articulated over headphones, the narrator instructs visitors clearly at the outset of the performance: "Du bist die Kamera" (You are the camera). You will, the speaker asserts, "record with all your senses: the images, the rooms, the light, the scents. . . . You record from the subjective. You shoot 'in the first person.'"¹⁰² As participants move around the venue, the narrator issues directions about viewing distance and focus. What is needed here, for example, is a slow "tracking shot down the stairs. Step by step to the bottom in the belly of the theatre." The performance is about getting to the core of the theatre. The approach is cinematic, although each shot is, visitors are reminded, "recorded not on film, but in your memory."¹⁰³ Being verbally constructed, each idiosyncratic "filming" of *Black Box* makes literal Deleuze's statement that with the emergence of narrative cinema, the "sequences of images and even each image, a single shot, are assimilated to propositions or rather oral utterances."¹⁰⁴ The similarity between the spoken directives of the narrator and the shot-by-shot experience constructed in the theatre is maintained, or deviated from, by each participant. In this way, both *The Way Out* and *Black Box* rely upon the form of single-shot cinema to create installational experiences concerned with a critical reviewing of theatre's structures and networks. In syndemic circumstances, this filmic technique offers one approach to the "renewed thinking" that

Aronson-Lehavi identifies as a possible affordance of theatre-making within this context of crisis. It prompts reflective engagement with significant questions about where theatre "actually takes place" and how its "architecture and buildings will change in the future" to converge with other forms of social gathering, as well as a reimagining of public spaces across physical and virtual contexts.¹⁰⁵ Both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* identify this mode of cinematic continuity with the duration of live work, and this is evident in Rimini Protokoll's narration: "because it is theatre, we cannot edit. So we are going to shoot one long tracking shot. One take, without a break." Visitors begin this "long shot through reflective windows," taking in both the "foyer—and the outside world. The theatre—and its surroundings."¹⁰⁶ The performance of the single shot here presents a wider view of what constitutes the theatre.

Performing as cameras in the theatre's offstage spaces, participants within *Black Box* undertake a mode of spectatorship that has the potential, as theatre historian Christin Essin posits, to "not just represent, but aestheticize backstage labor."¹⁰⁷ *Black Box* employs the language of film to direct visitors' attention to acts, spaces, and temporalities of theatrical production usually elided. In this way, the production expands the theatrical event and environment as installational. Artists have long looked beyond physical landscapes in installation-based practices. By invoking cinematic terminologies and perspectives, *Black Box* openly acknowledges the reality that, as art theorist Kate Mondloch expresses in her work on screen-reliant installation art, the "contemporary spectator's relationship to much visual production is indeed arbitrated by screens."¹⁰⁸ Both *Black Box* and *The Way Out* are concerned with ways of looking, in and at the theatre. In the former, the mediated perspective of everyday life is re-performed by participants as a mode of theatrical observation that brings new forms of attending that specifically focus on theatre's collaborative processes and recast the fabric of arts venues as installational forms. *The Way Out* is more definitely cinematic, in that viewers engage with Battersea Arts Centre at a distance even as they are drawn into the performance spaces represented onscreen via a mode of production that replicates a durational encounter in the theatre. In their distinctive forms, both projects address the ways in which, as Mondloch poses the challenge, "conditions of screen-based viewing 'matter' in both contemporary art and our digital everyday," and by extension how they necessarily inflect (post)-syndemic perspectives on theatrical practices, structured both remotely and as physically distanced. If, as Mondloch suggests, screen-reliant installation artworks "(re)materialize the neglected circuit between bodies and screens," then (post)-syndemic performances triangulate these positions with theatre's buildings to reveal models for reoccupation made apparent via installation.¹⁰⁹ Installation facilitates ways into theatre's futurity through a re-association of syndemic bodies, screens, and physical institutions. Virtual and distanced iterations allow the theatre to be depicted as an image of

its histories and futures that marks out the work to be done in its digital and physical realizations post-syndemic.

Preparing for Performance and Spectators Onstage

Toward the end of *Black Box*, the narrator warns visitors: "Get ready to perform." This section of the performance specifically approaches the stage, but before any enactment the ritual form of this advance is reported by the voice of an actor who describes how this sequence usually plays out. As performers wait backstage they "can already hear people. The murmuring in the auditorium" that is always, spectators are told, listening in through headphones, a "situation of expectation."¹¹⁰ In many ways this articulation is nostalgic. It longs for a return to theatre as it has been, presenting the experience of standing offstage in the dark as a "magical moment" filled with potential. The overall effect of the performances, and particularly *The Way Out*, is also, at least for some, somewhat wistful. Reviewers conclude that this filmic theatrical production "leaves us with yearning," while critical responses suggest that *Black Box*, by showing "theater from another side," works toward and "arouses a longing."¹¹¹ These reviews convey a sense of loss appropriate to the syndemic moment, but likewise look toward recuperation and future encounter. In some ways, they intersect with Hann's espousal of celebration in climate-changed theatre, a practice well-placed to "celebrate social interaction; to celebrate the deep pasts and deep futures of performance things and architectures; to celebrate the unique moment in history at which these people and materials have come together."¹¹² The syndemic presents a similarly "unique" and related context that enables revised models of creation and interaction to be imagined by setting new optics on historical versions of theatre. Highlighting specific operations as untenable, the situation of syndemic presents certain theatrical processes as more broadly outdated and inaccessible, making way instead for forms that decenter privilege by including and acknowledging a wider set of communities as theatre's makers. For "three months long this theatre was closed," the narrator relates in *Black Box*: "One thing is certain: it will never be as it was before." Waiting for a performance to commence or, in the situation of syndemic, for theatre's producers to take up the possibilities for change tested by the necessary rehearsal and extension of digital forms and physically distanced practices in recent years, the question is always, as the performer relates to us from a past perspective in *Black Box*, "What happens next?"¹¹³

(fig. 5).

In the final scenes of *Black Box*, participants move from stage to auditorium to foyer as each visitor in turn takes to the full-scale version of the platform prefigured in the model box, watching another occupy this position first from backstage and then applauding the subsequent spectator from the stalls. "Go in the light on the stage," participants are told. The stage is scuffed and marked with

previous acts and productions. The spotlight follows each spectator across the stage. A shadow is cast. "Stand on the marker looking at the auditorium." Which auditorium, visitors might wonder: the one where a single spectator sits, as they have also been aurally instructed to do so, in the tenth seat of the tenth row, or the image of the "empty" theatre that is lowered into place as the scenic backdrop? This scrim is the scale version of what was previously displayed in the model box. It is, we have now been told by the scenic painters, a two-dimensional rendering of Teatro alla Scala in Milan. The next direction demands a "freeze frame" of the auditorium.¹¹⁴ This is the shot that visitors should capture, a picture of the theatre's near-empty seating rake, but this sort of image is already represented for us in advance and displayed upstage. The depiction does not, then, mirror the "real" stalls seating of the Schauspiel Stuttgart, but rather places as a backdrop the more traditional view of a theatre that still guides so many of our experiences of performance. Looking at this image and the auditorium before us, with seats side by side, these spaces may no longer seem fit for purpose in the situation of syndemic. Here, physical distancing translates to an aesthetic estrangement not from the narrative of a production, as in previous effects of theatrical distancing, but from the shapes and layouts of buildings long familiar to theatregoers. What we encounter within the context of syndemic are what Gómez-Peña terms the "shifting borders between isolation and alienation."¹¹⁵ As visitors stand onstage we are told, "[f]ocus on the audience even if you don't see it."¹¹⁶ By fixing on audiences who are joining online or at distance, *Black Box* and *The Way Out* lay bare those aspects of theatre's histories and futures that have become urgently apparent through the lived experience of syndemic. These (post)-syndemic performances move us deeply into theatre's institutions, raising questions about functionality and sustainability, precarity and work practices, community and individualism, until theatres are in danger of appearing more like installations than spaces equipped for use. They also mark out ways to occupy and enliven these sites via approaches that newly reintegrate or circumvent theatre's previous frames, agency-illusions, and networks. The installational theatres of syndemic refuse the arbitrary protocols that separate previously distinct artistic forms and direct attention, via missing bodies, to the physical-material and institutional constructs of theatre's venues and structures of power. Visitors are asked to attend directly to the architecture of theatrical buildings, processes, and people rather than shows, and this in itself sets out a model for the remaking of theatre's houses and projects post-syndemic.

FIGURE CAPTIONS:

Figure 1. *Black Box*. (Photo: Copyright © Björn Klein.)

Figure 2. Distancing of Guide (Omid Djalili) and Outsider (Bláithín Mac Gabhann) in *The Way Out*, dir. Suri Krishnamma, Battersea Arts Center, London, 2020. Image courtesy of Battersea Arts Centre.

Figure 3. *Black Box*. (Photo: Copyright © Björn Klein.)

Figure 4. Botis Seva in *The Way Out*, dir. Suri Krishnamma, Battersea Arts Center, London, 2020.

Image courtesy of Battersea Arts Centre.

Figure 5. *Black Box*. (Photo: Copyright © Björn Klein.)

FOOTNOTES

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- ¹ *Black Box* premiered at Théâtre de Vidy, Lausanne, from June 9 to July 12, 2020 as *Boîte noire* and was then produced in multiple short runs (initially postponed) at Schauspiel Stuttgart in 2021 and Volkstheater Vienna during 2021–22. The production is site responsive to the specificities of each venue, in terms of its contributors, audio narration (including the language of performance), and the particularities of the backstage spaces and route included on the tour. The text cited in this essay is translated from the German-language script and 360° filmed recording of the performance made at the Schauspiel Stuttgart. I am grateful to director Stefan Kaegi of Rimini Protokoll for generously sharing these materials.
- ² Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*, directed by Stefan Kaegi, Schauspiel Stuttgart, 2021: "Meine Anweisungen sind deine Tonspur"; "Du setzt dich auf den schwarzen Stuhl"; "Steh auf und geh da hin, wo das Licht eine Bühne andeutet."
- ³ I am grateful to friend and colleague Joe Kelleher who read and commented on this essay in draft form, and echoed back to me, with characteristic clarity and insight, the key points of interest proposed through this developing theory.
- ⁴ Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 7.
- ⁵ See Richard Horton, "Offline: COVID-19 Is Not a Pandemic," *Lancet* 396, no. 10255 (September 26, 2020); and Emily Mendenhall, "The COVID-19 Syndemic Is Not Global: Context Matters," *Lancet* 396, no. 10264 (November 28, 2020).
- ⁶ Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, "Theatre in Times of Crisis and Transformation," in "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" *TDR: The Drama Review* 64, no. 3 (2020): 221.
- ⁷ González, *Subject to Display*, 8.
- ⁸ Carol Martin, "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" *TDR: The Drama Review* 64, no. 3 (2020): 213.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Suri Krishnamma, personal communication (email) with the author, February 14, 2022.
- ¹¹ Martin, "Forum," 213.
- ¹² Heike Roms, "Editorial: Training for Performance Art and Live Art," *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 11, no. 2 (2020): 117–25. 118.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Battersea Arts Centre, "A Theatrical Adventure Around Our Building, Now on BBC iPlayer," available at <https://bac.org.uk/the-making-of-the-way-out/>.

¹⁶ Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 163.

¹⁷ This argument builds from provisional ideas tested in invited articles for special issues of French theatre journal *Théâtre/Public* on "Faire scène: Arts de la scène et arts visuels" (2021) and *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* on "Aural/Oral Dramaturgies" (2021) that situate early examples of London-based syndemic theatre practice from 2020 (*Blindness*, a socially distanced sound installation adapted by Simon Stephens and directed by Walter Meierjohann, with sound design by Ben and Max Ringham, for the Donmar Warehouse; and *Caretaker*, an online durational installation by Hester Chillingworth live-streamed for the Royal Court) in relation to corresponding curatorial and artistic forms that have, during this century, mounted the gallery as site for performance. This essay extends the scope of these earlier contextualizations by engaging with examples from the UK and Germany that present not just the stage as installational, as examined in the previously cited essays, but entire theatre venues. See Georgina Guy, "Staged Installation, Reported Speech, and Syndemic Images in *Blindness* and *Caretaker* (2020)," in "Special issue on Aural/Oral Dramaturgies," *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* 24 (2021), available at <https://www.critical-stages.org/24/staged-installation-reported-speech-and-syndemic-images-in-blindness-and-caretaker-2020/>.

¹⁸ Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, The Image, and the Space-in-Between," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 155.

¹⁹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 144.

²⁰ Oliver Reese, qtd. in Tom Ravenscroft, "Berliner Ensemble Gives Glimpse of Its Socially Distanced Theatre," available at <https://www.dezeen.com/2020/06/04/berliner-ensemble-socially-distanced-theatre/#>. Thanks to Gwyneth Donlon, PhD candidate in Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, who, knowing about my work on post-syndemic theatre as installation, drew my attention to this interview.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rachel Hann, "Afterword: How to Celebrate," in Tanja Beer, *Ecoscenography: An Introduction to Ecological Design for Performance* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 193.

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- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Georgina Guy, "Les scènes contemporaines de l'exposition de la performance: Théâtralité, comparaison, auralité," in "Special issue on Faire scène: Arts de la scène et arts visuels," *Théâtre/Public* 239 (2021): 77.
- ²⁵ Guy, "Staged Installation."
- ²⁶ Hann, "Afterword," 192–93.
- ²⁷ Jens Roselt, "Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre: Institutions, Challenges and Continuities," *Performance Paradigm* 11 (2015): 76–87, quote on 76.
- ²⁸ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "So eine Farbe, die man eigentlich nicht sehen soll. Theater-Schwarz für die unsichtbaren Teile."
- ²⁹ Rimini Protokoll, "*Black Box: Phantom Theatre for 1 Person*, by Stefan Kaegi," available at <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/black-box>.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Thomas Rothschild, "Der Theater-besucher als Kamera," *Kultura Extra*, available at https://www.kultura-extra.de/theater/veranstaltung/repertoire_BlackBox_schauspielS.php.
- ³² BBC, "Performance Live: *The Way Out*," available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0892kzy>.
- ³³ Battersea Arts Centre, "Relaxed Venue," available at <https://bac.org.uk/relaxed-venue/>.
- ³⁴ Daniel Sack, ed., *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 1.
- ³⁶ Ibid., xx.
- ³⁷ Schauspiel Stuttgart, "*Black Box. Phantomtheater für 1 Person*," available at https://www.schauspiel-stuttgart.de/download/22439/200708_premiereinladung_black_box_rimini_protokoll_14._jul_p_m_schauspiel_stuttgart.pdf.
- "Blick frei auf das, was Theater war, ist, sein kann."
- ³⁸ It is worth noting that the price of a ticket for *Black Box* at Schauspiel Stuttgart was fifteen euros, with a reduced student fee of seven euros. *The Way Out* was freely accessible to TV licence holders in the UK. A TV Licence costs £159 per year.
- ³⁹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, selected from his blog in *TDR* eds., "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" 205.
- ⁴⁰ Rimini Protokoll, "*Black Box*" webpage.
- ⁴¹ Aronson-Lehavi, "Theatre in Times of Crisis and Transformation," 221.

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- ⁴² Rimini Protokoll, "Black Box" webpage.
- ⁴³ Sack, *Imagined Theatres*, xx.
- ⁴⁴ Roselt, "Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre," 77–86.
- ⁴⁵ Roms, "Editorial." 18.
- ⁴⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Ich glaube nicht, dass Theater in Texten und Büchern überleben wird"; "Theater ist Raum, Geruch, Adrenalin, Gemeinschaft."
- ⁴⁷ González, *Subject to Display*, 19, 15.
- ⁴⁸ Guy, "Les scenes contemporaines," 81.
- ⁴⁹ Catherine Wood, *Performance in Contemporary Art* (London: Tate, 2019), 10.
- ⁵⁰ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), 6, 8.
- ⁵¹ Allain and Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 163.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Aber heute geht es nicht in den Zuschauerraum. Ich zeige dir einen anderen Weg."
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., "Setz dich auf die Bank wie vor ein Bild im Museum."
- ⁵⁵ Sack, *Imagined Theatres*, xvii.
- ⁵⁶ Allain and Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 162.
- ⁵⁷ Roselt, "Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre," 79.
- ⁵⁸ Rimini Protokoll, "Black Box" webpage.
- ⁵⁹ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Aber das muss man dann alles versteckt mache."
- ⁶⁰ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 11.
- ⁶¹ Marvin Carlson, "Immersive Theatre and the Reception Process," *Forum Modernes Theater* 27, nos. 1–2 (2012): 18–22.
- ⁶² Indeed, neither of the examples reviewed in detail in my earlier essay for *Critical Stages* follow an immersive model, but rather render the stage (specifically in these cases) as an installational space; see Guy, "Staged Installation."
- ⁶³ Adam Alston, "Making Mistakes in Immersive Theatre: Spectatorship and Errant Immersion," *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 4, no. 1 (2016): 62.
- ⁶⁴ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 10.
- ⁶⁵ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "In einem Glaskasten, als wäre das ein Ritual aus einer anderen Zeit, ausgestellt in der Vitrine eines Museums."
- ⁶⁶ The emphasis on aural narration is characteristic of (post)-syndemic theatre practices that render the stage, and/or the theatre more broadly, as installation. These productions, I argue in "Staged Installation, Reported Speech, and Syndemic Images in *Blindness* and *Caretaker* (2020),"

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- "establish emergent forms of syndemic inflected performance articulated through reported speech and staged as installation" by "foregrounding verbal over visual representation" (n.p.).
- ⁶⁷ Martin, in *TDR* eds., "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" 213.
- ⁶⁸ James Frieze, ed., *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9.
- ⁶⁹ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "verstehen und festzuhalten, was das hier war—was hier stattfand."
- ⁷⁰ Martin Oversohl for *DPA* cited and translated on Schauspiel Stuttgart, "*Black Box. Phantomtheater für 1 Person.*"
- ⁷¹ Stefan Kaegi, qtd. in Peter M. Boenisch, "Other People Live: Rimini Protokoll and Their 'Theatre of Experts,'" *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18, no. 1 (2008): 112.
- ⁷² Rimini Protokoll, "*Black Box*" webpage.
- ⁷³ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 10.
- ⁷⁴ Roselt, "Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre," 76.
- ⁷⁵ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 10.
- ⁷⁶ Morse, "Video Installation Art," 156–57.
- ⁷⁷ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 10.
- ⁷⁸ *The Way Out*, written and directed by Suri Krishnamma, BAC, 2020.
- ⁷⁹ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 16.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁸¹ BBC, "Performance Live: *The Way Out.*"
- ⁸² Bishop, *Installation Art*, 47.
- ⁸³ The Cocoa Butter Club, "About Us," available at <https://www.thecocoabutterclub.com/about-us>.
- ⁸⁴ Battersea Arts Centre, "Pull Up or Shut Up: Our Statistics," available at <https://bac.org.uk/pulluporshutup/>. There remains a discrepancy between the artists who present work at BAC and the makeup of the permanent staff team, who were 68 percent white and 87 percent nondisabled as of March 31, 2020. The venue states an "ambition to represent the diversity of London in our staff team by 2022." Since April 2020, 50 percent of the Board of Trustees is POC.
- ⁸⁵ *The Way Out.*
- ⁸⁶ Judith Butler and George Yancy, "Interview: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities (Republication)," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (2020): 483–87.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 484.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ *The Way Out.*

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- ⁹⁰ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 13.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., 47.
- ⁹² González, *Subject to Display*, 9.
- ⁹³ Carlson, "Immersive Theatre," 22.
- ⁹⁴ Morse, "Video Installation Art," 155.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., 157–58, 161.
- ⁹⁶ Aronson-Lehavi, "Theatre in Times of Crisis and Transformation," 220.
- ⁹⁷ Morse, "Video Installation Art," 155.
- ⁹⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 188.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁰ Roger Odin, "The Single Shot, Narration, and Creativity in the Space of Everyday Communication," in *Stories: Screen Narrative in the Digital Era*, ed. Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 167.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 167–68.
- ¹⁰² Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Meine Anweisungen sind deine Tonspur. Du bist die Kamera. Oder sagen wir: das was beim Film die Kamera wäre - nur eben im Theater. Du wirst mit allen Sinnen aufzeichnen: Die Bilder, die Räume, das Licht, den Geruch. . . . Du nimmst aus der Subjektive auf. Du drehst 'in der ersten Person.'"
- ¹⁰³ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Langsame Kamerafahrt Treppe abwärts. Stufe für Stufe bis zu unterst in den Bauch des Theaters"; "Aufgezeichnet wird nicht auf Film, sondern in deinem Gedächtnis."
- ¹⁰⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 25.
- ¹⁰⁵ Aronson-Lehavi, "Theatre in Times of Crisis and Transformation," 221.
- ¹⁰⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Und weil es Theater ist, können wir nicht schneiden. Wir werden also eine einzige lange Kamerafahrt drehen. Einen Take, ohne Pause"; "Deine Aufzeichnung beginnt mit einer Totale durch spiegelnde Fensterscheiben. Du siehst: Das Foyer - und die Aussenwelt. Das Theater - und seine Umgebung."
- ¹⁰⁷ Christin Essin, "An Aesthetic of Backstage Labor," *Theatre Topics* 21, no. 1 (2011): 35.
- ¹⁰⁸ Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xvi.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., xxi.

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- ¹¹⁰ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Bereitmachen zum Auftritt." "Ich höre schon die Leute. Das Gemurmel im Zuschauerraum. Das ist eine Situation immer der Erwartung." "Und es ist auch ein magischer Moment, wenn das Zuschauerlicht ausgeht."
- ¹¹¹ Arifa Akbar, "The Way Out Review: Join Omid Djalili on a Whirl through Wonderland," available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/14/the-way-out-review-battersea-arts-centre-omid-djalili>. Susanne Kaufman for SWR2 cited and translated on Schauspiel Stuttgart "*Black Box. Phantomtheater für 1 Person.*"
- ¹¹² Hann, "Afterword," 191–92.
- ¹¹³ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "3 Monate lang war dieses Theater geschlossen. Ich weiß nicht, wann dieses Foyer sich wieder mit hunderten von Menschen füllen wird. Fest steht: es wird nie mehr so sein wie früher"; "Was kommt jetzt?"
- ¹¹⁴ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Geh im Licht auf die Bühne"; "Stell dich auf die Markierung mit Blick in den Zuschauerraum"; "Standbild Zuschauerraum."
- ¹¹⁵ Gómez-Peña, selected from his blog in *TDR* eds., "Forum: After COVID-19, What?" 206.
- ¹¹⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *Black Box*: "Fokussiere auf das Publikum, auch wenn du es nicht siehst."