"RespOnce – Design for Breakdown"
- how to develop a devising tool for interactive stage design.

Practice-based research in Performning Arts
NSU Winter Seminar Copenhagen 2007

RespOnce Design For BreakDown

- how to develop a devising tool for interactive stage design.

How and why do artist research?

Katrine Nilsen
Stage & Production Designer
Danish Design School, Copenhagen, DK

My name is Katrine Nilsen, I am a stage designer and I would like to address the questions – *how and why do artists research?* – by presenting an example of my own work, *"The Response Project – Design for Breakdown"*.

There is mainly two reasons why I start researching;

Researching for a specific purpose

**Stage Design for "Hamlet"**

? How do I get there
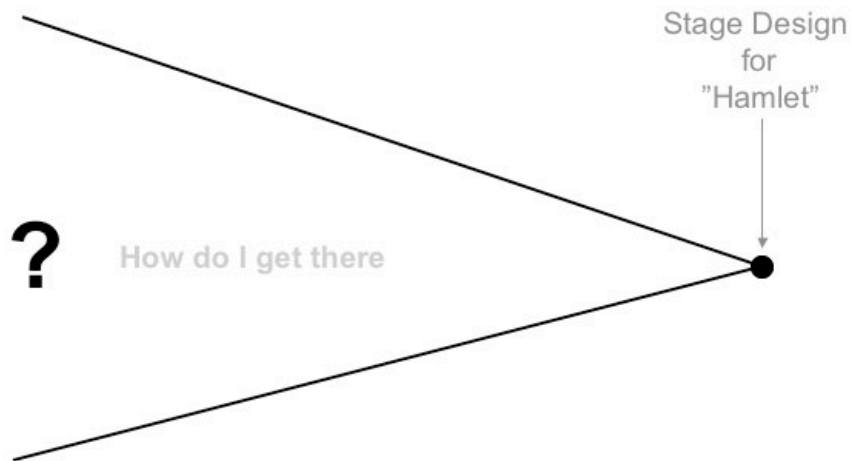
1. The most common reason is when I have to create a specific Stage Design, say for example "Hamlet". Then I will start to research on costumes, interiors a.s.o, but I will also start an associative research on notions like *loneliness, isolation, dilemma* etc. My research will bring me in all kinds of directions, but I will always know what the final purpose is – I just don't know yet *how* to get there!

Researching for a reason...

The Need of
...

Where/What will it bring me **?**
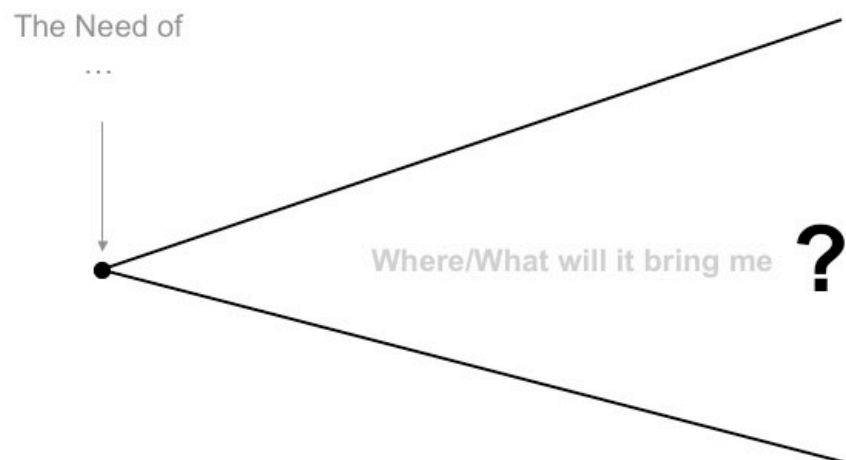
2. But sometimes I discover a specific need or the same problem keeps occurring, which makes me aware that I need to deal with it and find a solution to avoid getting stuck at the same point over and over. Or perhaps I simply get curious on a certain topic, that I want to investigate further to be able to understand and handle it better or to develop new methods or expressions. In this case I will know my point of departure, but not exactly _what_ and _where_ it bring me.

But either way, my research will look very much like this.
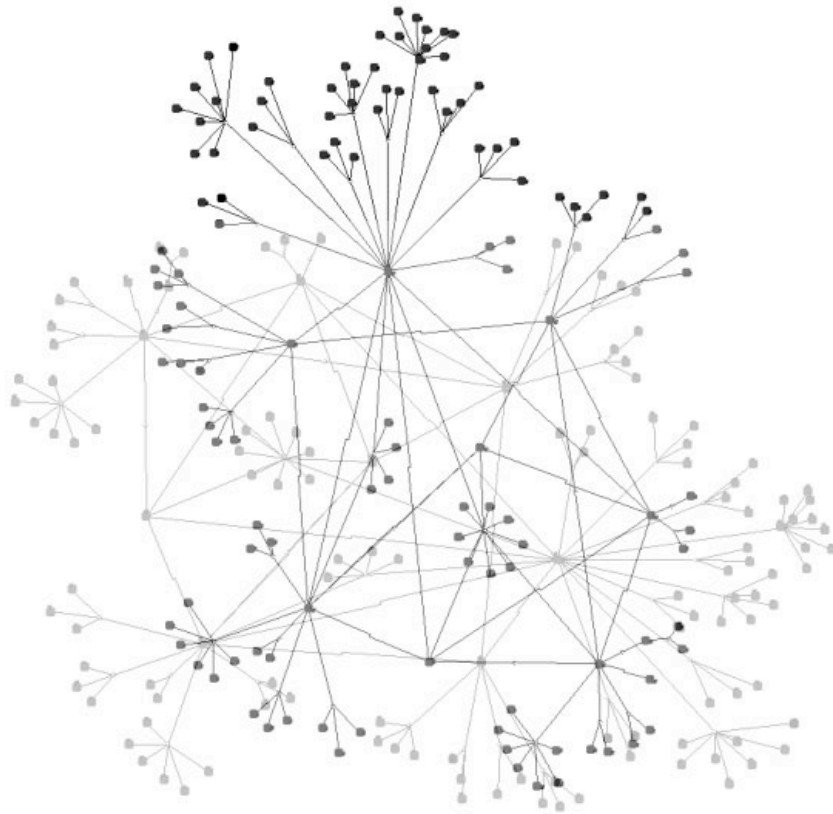
It might seem illogical and chaotic to others, it is often based on instincts and personal subconscious references or interests and I can't always explain how I get from one point to another, but most of the time it makes perfectly sense to me!
Though there is of course times where even I get lost and need to find my way back to the out-spring - or situations where it is crucial that I am able to communicate my ideas or my needs to others.
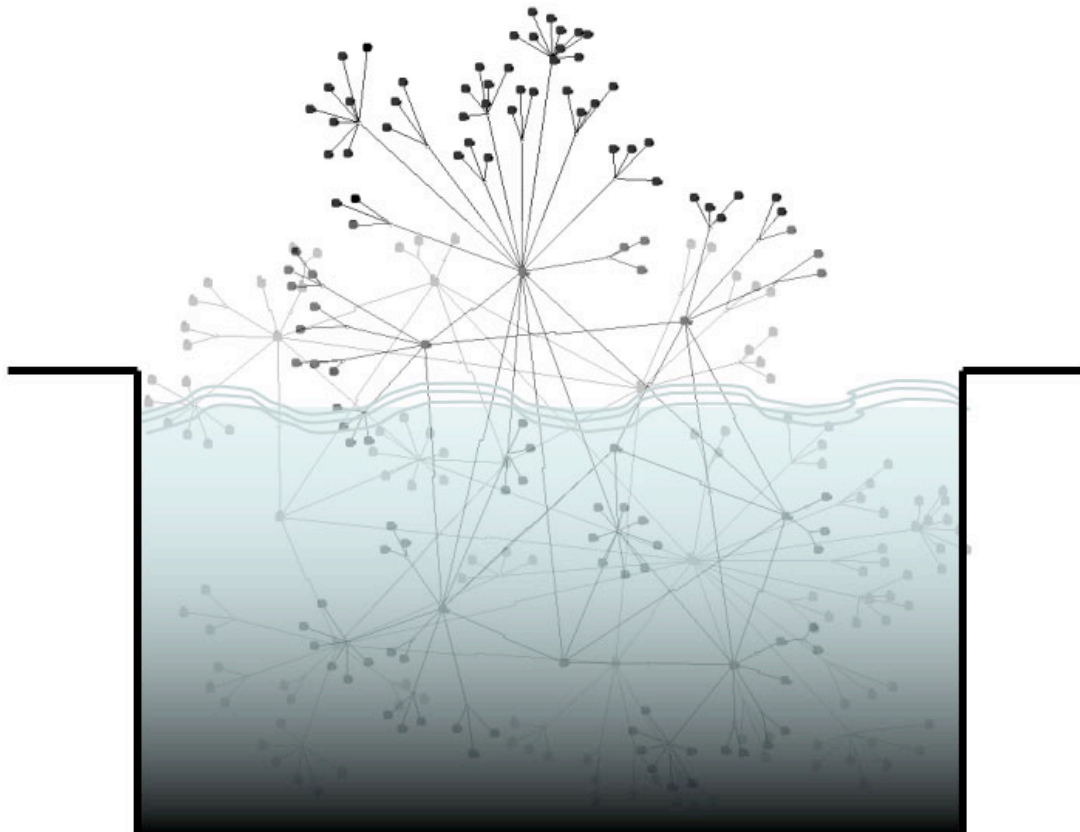
But this isn't made easier by the fact that a lot of my knowledge is subconscious and therefore parts of my creative process simply can't be put into words.
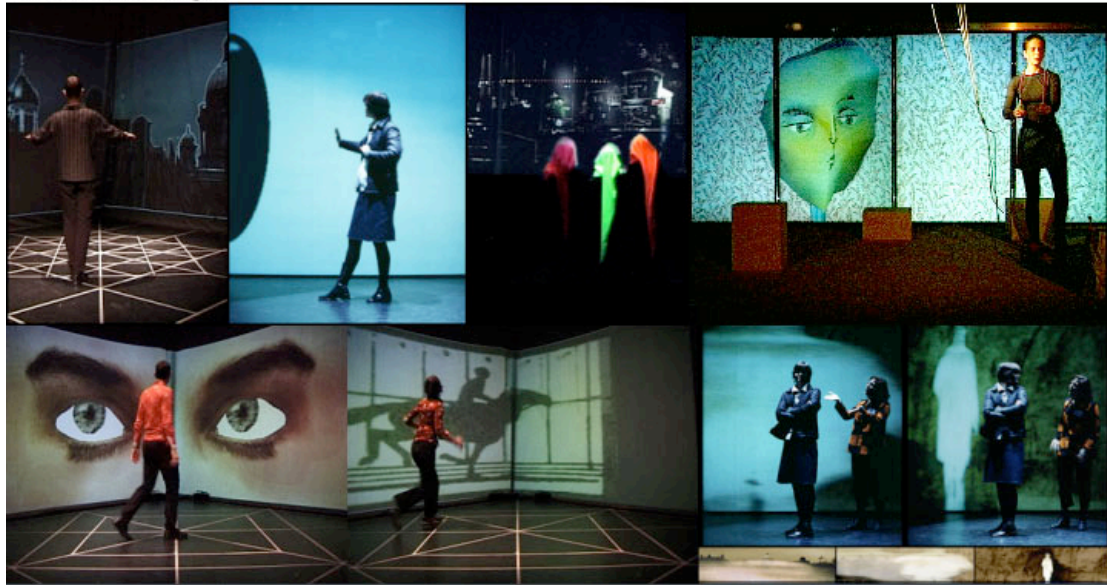So what do I do?

The RespOnce project sprung from such a wish to find a scenographic devising method and a non-verbal communication tool.

respOnce

Design For BreakDown ... a stage to be used!

The challenge of designing for the (inter)active Stage

The Virtual Stage

The need arose from two angels. First of all from my involvement with the virtual media and the situation of designing for the interactive situation. Suddenly I should not only design the visual expression, but also the "interface", so I had to understand what *that* meant!

I realised that what it meant was, that I had to integrate interaction possibilities in the scenery and most of all make these understandable and accessible for the participants, say performers or audience.

But since the scenic objects was virtual, I also had to find a tool that would make it possible for both me (and the performers) to interpret our experiences from physical objects and transfer this into the virtual.

respOnce

# Design For BreakDown ... a stage to be used!

The challenge of designing for the (inter)active Stage

The Physical Stage

The other reason why I initiated *the RespOnce Project*, was because I realized that the notion of "Stage Design" and the methods that is commonly used to design and produce it, doesn't really measure the needs of the modern performance art.

respOnce

Framing the action with a picture…
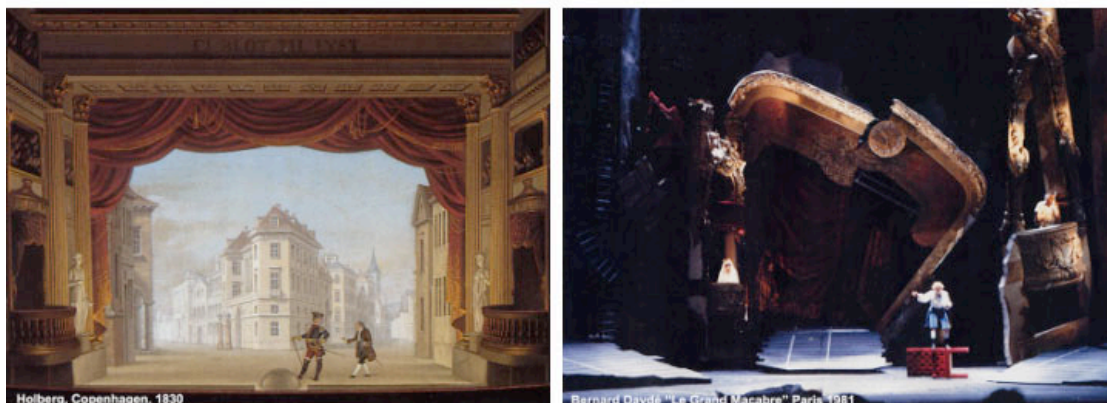
Seen in a historical perspective: - the Stage Design of the (early) Proscenium Theatre consisted of a painted naturalistic backdrop – **a picture** which served as a illustration, framing the real action taking place on the front stage, mainly performed in *spoken words*.

The normal procedure would be, that the Stage Designer, with a point of departure in the pre-written text, produced the scenery, while the director and the actors alongside would develop and rehearse the play. Usually this meant that scenery and action wasn't really coupled until right before the final Premiere…the one placed into the other, like in a **"Chinese Box"** – and obviously there was a risk that they wouldn't actually perform a synergy.
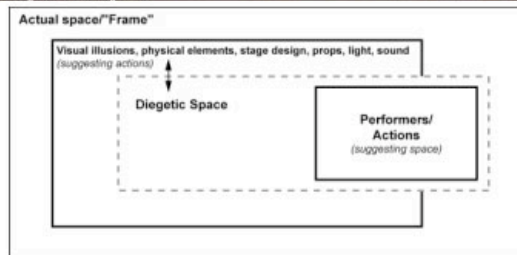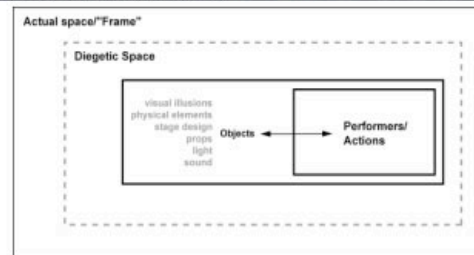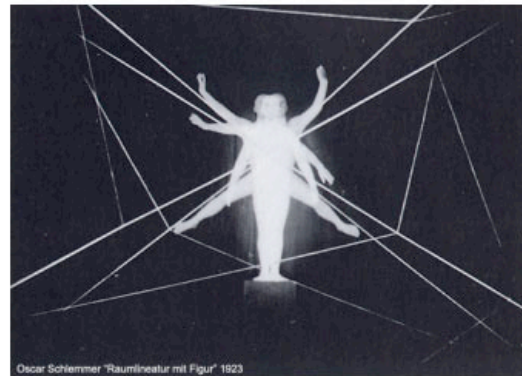

This procedure is more or less the same today … and, in my experience, even commonly used within the modern stage arts!

But to me this doesn't really make sense somehow, since these productions is often developed through various *devising processes* and furthermore *the notion of "text"* is rarely based on pre-written words, but more likely takes a point of departure in *all* the signs formed by the scenic images and actions on stage. Space, object or performer, as well as light, sound, music, word or movements, are all seen as equal means of expression.

But more important, what creates the expression, is not as much due to the scenic *"objects"* in itself, but to the interrelation and interaction between them.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design
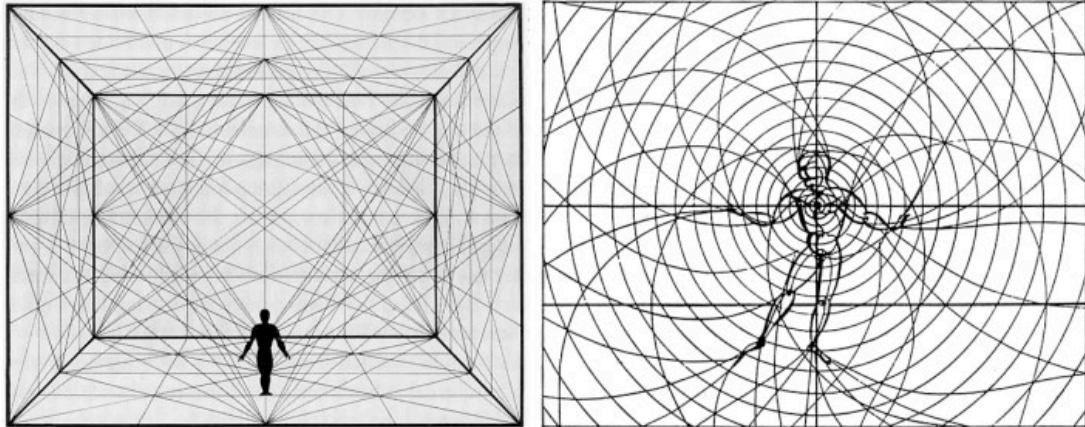
Oskar Schlemmer "Figur Und Raumlineatur" 1924

In my opinion the modern performance arts therefore requires a whole different perspective on the notion of "Stage Design" and how to produce it, which takes a point of departure in the intended (inter)action on stage. Here illustrated with Oskar Schlemmers models from 1924, which describes the proportional composition between the body and space and the possible action or extension lines from the body and into the space.

I realized that I needed a new production method, a *tool* to be able to participate in the *devising* process.

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

But first of all I needed a sort of a *Vocabulary* to be able to describe and analyse the *scenic material*, its potentials and my intentions with it. I simply had to find out – *what is all things made of*!? What *basic elements* do I have to operate with?

PUNKT LINIE FLÄCHE KÖRPER
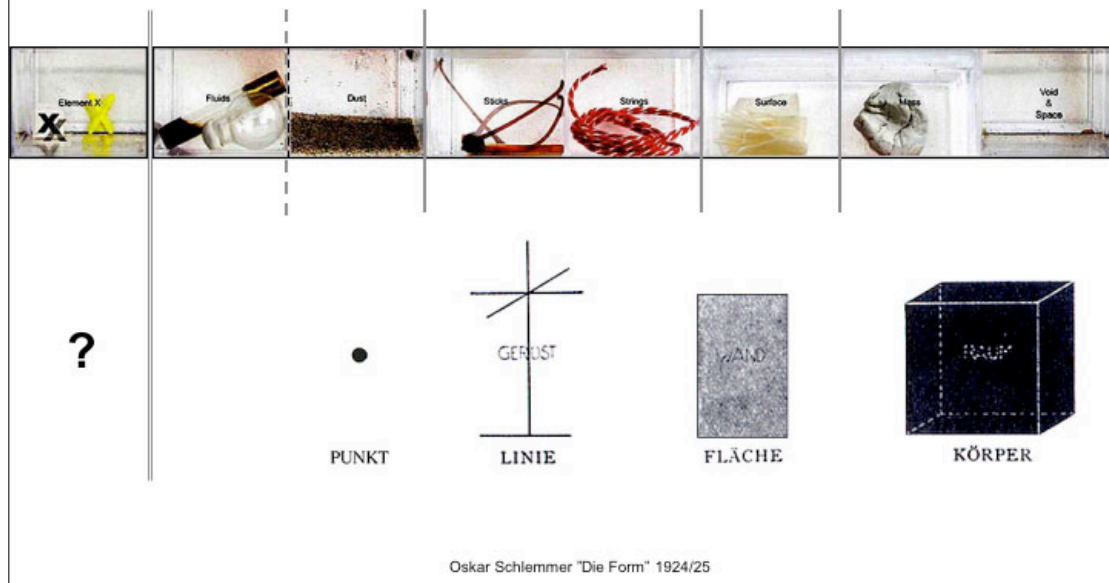
Oskar Schlemmer "Die Form" 1924/25

For that I borrowed another model from Oskar Schlemmer, where he sorted the basic forms into four categories – *Point, Line, Plane and Corpus*.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown

- tools and methods for responsive stage design

Oskar Schlemmer "Die Form" 1924/25

Though, in my investigation I found that I further needed and therefore added a fifth category – *the Formless*. Another *Element X* also kept spooking around in my head, but I couldn't at that time quite explain what that was all about.

But what I found out was, that the categories also quite naturally refers to the different parts of *our body – The Flesh, The Skin, The Bones, The remains –* as in *"Ashes to Ashes" and The Bodily Fluids.*

RespOnce Design For BreakDown

- tools and methods for responsive stage design

"Element X"	"Fluids"	"Grains"	"Sticks"	"Strings"	"Surface" ("Membrane")	"Mass" ("Wax")	
(The 'Joker')	(The Body Fluids)	(The Remains)	(The Bones)	(The Veins, Tendons & Nerves)	(The Skin)	(The Flesh)	
???	*Formless*	*Units*	*Construction*	*Lines & Knots*	*plane/surface*	*volume/form*	
- the unexpected, a supplement? - accessory - "annotation", "figure"? - a single = Solo - a lot = Repetition - several different = Variation	- Movement/Life or destruction (death) - to soften, dissolve & destroy - to mix & blend - to "surround" & absorb	- (a demolished mass or form) - to sprinkle, strew or mould - can create patterns, imprints & outlines - can cover a large area or be gathered into heaps	- to pile, bundle & bend - can indicate & construct a form - to point - to extend	- can connect & be streched between point - can join, assemble - can create lines, outlines - can encircle	- to fold and unfold - a cover, hide or wrapping - can produce a plane surface - a background, backdrop, wall or floor	- to model, shape, constuct & transform - can surround, fill up & complete - can be decomposed, rebuild & transformed	

The idea was now to sort out and describe each of the five categories unique physical qualities and potential dramatic capabilities, such as *bending, wrapping, supporting, covering, folding, dripping etc. etc.*

The Toolbox - "Categorization"

These capabilities do of course depend on what *Material* it was made of. A *Plane* for instance made out of plastic would collapse, paper could fold, thin wood or metal would flex and bend, whereas a plane made out of solid wood or concrete wouldn't bend at all, but could stand a lot of weight etc.
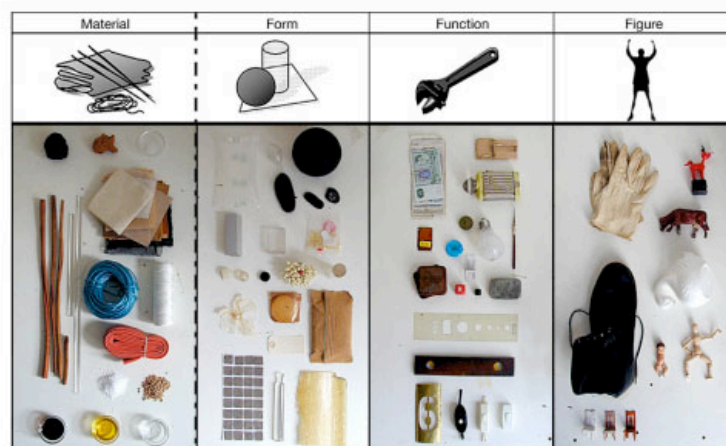
But if a *Material* is *a physical substances used to make things from*, then what else is there?

What other *Forms, Functions and Figures* can the material be shaped into? This was why the *Element X* kept spooking around in my head, because I knew that *the Object* – whether it is a Redy-Made or Object Trouvé – is often also used as part of the *scenic "material"*. It is either used for what it is (as a Prop) or it is used metaphorical for what it contextualize in the interaction with the performer or other elements on the stage.

Later experiments that I have done with different performers, has thought me that we often gets fascinated by and tends to choose the *Figure* among other things, but that it often limits the expression possibilities on stage, more than *Materials, Forms and Functions*. Probably of the same reason why it fascinate us. A puppet, a life-size doll or a dollhouse always tells an intense, but also often a very specific story, which might leave very little room for other stories to be told.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design
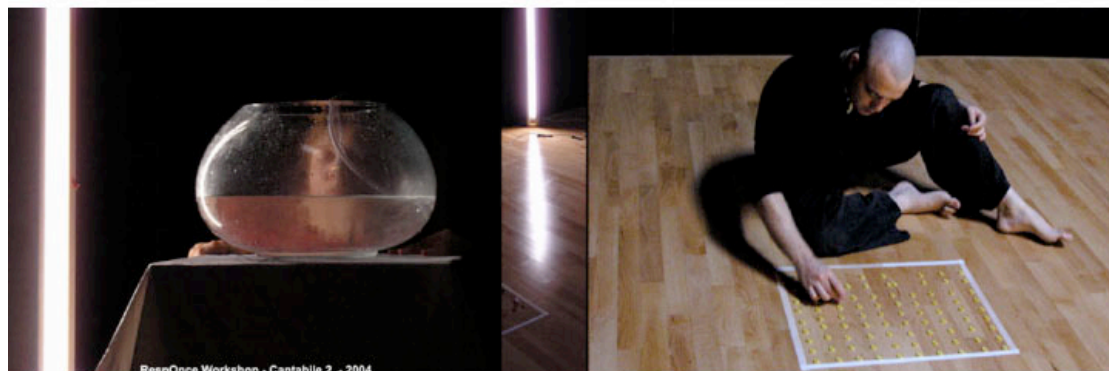
The Toolbox - "The total Matrix"

But – I now had a full matrix to work from, which was both represented in words and in *matter*. Then I just had to try out what it could be used for.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - investigation of the object itself

RespOnce Workshop - Cantabile 2 - 2004

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

First of all it can be used to systematically investigate different objects and materials, to become aware of and be able to divide between what it *is*, what it can *do* and what it can *represent*.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - choreographing the object

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

This knowledge can then be used in the performance with a certain material or object. And one of the things we learned from that, was that it is often no good to try and force the material to do what *you* want, but better to learn and take a point of departure in what the object actually can perform.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - the body in dialogue with the object

RespOnce Workshop - Cantabile 2 (SOSA) - 2005

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

This means that the object or material sometimes *obstructs* the body, which can of course also be investigated and used deliberately.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - the process of "designing" the object

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

But when the *obstructions* becomes unintended and stops an idea form being fulfilled, the system can also be used to further develop the material, by analyzing what qualities is acquired or preferred and which you want to change or get rid of.

This process doesn't always follow logical lines and arguments and often more hidden properties will be determine the choice.

In this case the performer "fell in love" with a small table-ventilator, which with its cable assembled an animal with a long tail, sitting on her shoulder, the "tail" wrapping her up. Though the expression and the dimension of the ventilator made it difficult for her to work with it in a larger scale, incorporating her own body. So by replacing it with a flexible ventilation *tube*, a larger and more "expressionless" object, we expanded the quality of "wrapping up" and in the same time kept the character of a "being".

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown

- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - changing the expression by changing the material
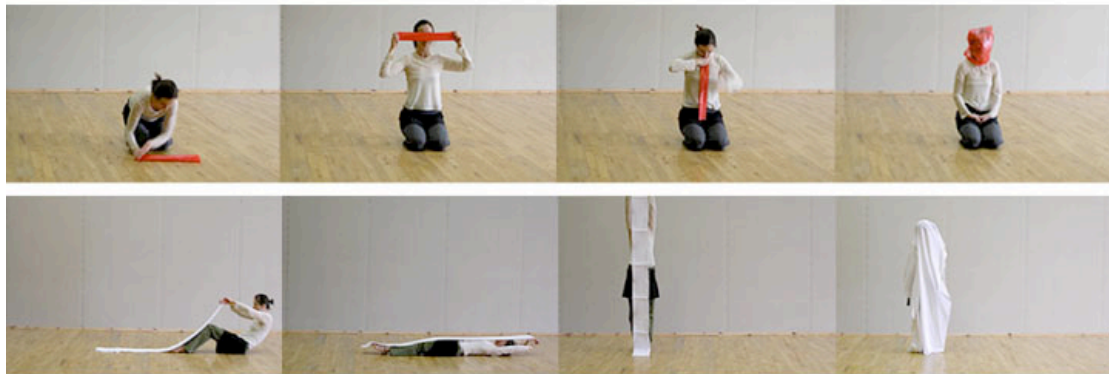
RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05
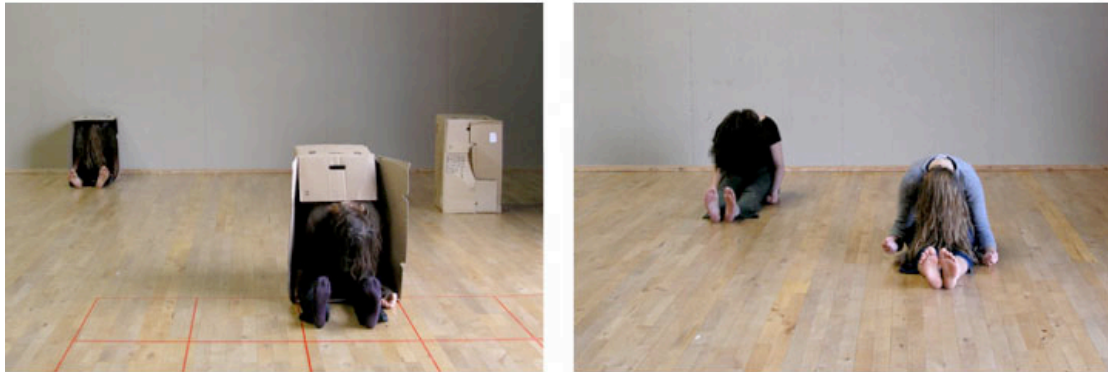
Swapping one material for another will not only change the expression, but most likely also the context, which means that there might be added whole new meanings and details to the performance.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - learning from the object

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

So perhaps you might just choose to pick what you've learned from the object, and transfer this into your own act.

respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Chair - Investigating one object though the categories

"The Dramaturgy of the Object" - Ellen Spens - Danish National School of Theatre - Copenhagen - Denmark 2006

respOnce

The system can also be used to pick *one* object and investigate this through all the categories, to compare and pick from the different expressions and contexts that this will generate.

RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

The objects can of course also be used to construct *lines of action*.
Here it is performed as *Still-Life* presenting either something already happened or something that inevitable are *going to* happen. A short performance was later created, based on these still-life.
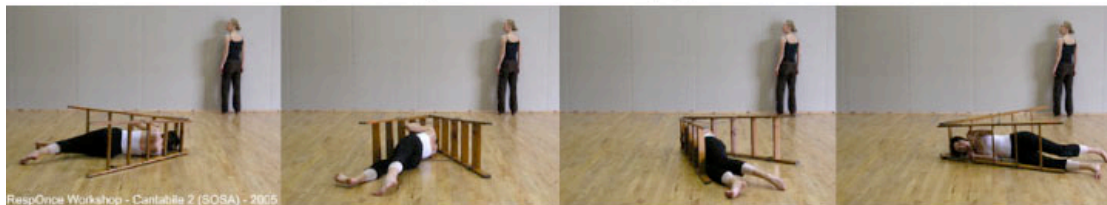
respOnce

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- tools and methods for responsive stage design

The Toolbox - composition with the object
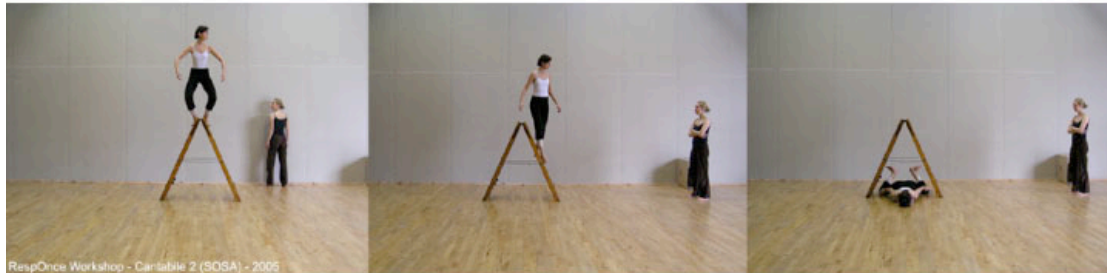
RespOnce Workshops - Cantabile 2/ SOSA - Vordingborg - Denmark 2004-05

This way you can compose a whole performance and a scenery by simply combining different line of action or still-life, developed with an object.
Here I asked the performers to combine and create a naturally flow between three different still-life with a latter.

RespOnce Design For BreakDown
- how to develop a devising tool for interactive stage design.
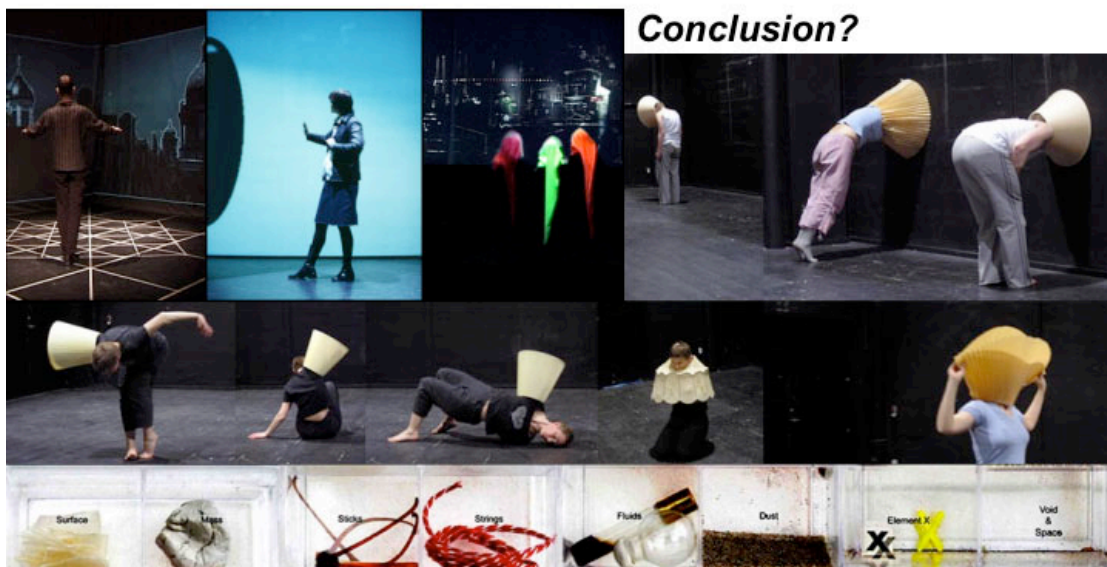
Conclusion?

The intention is that these experiences and expressions eventually also can be transferred and applied to the virtual space or even being used for other purposes that Performance art.

The principle of the Matrix represent a common frame of reference, which can serve as a "brainstorm" or devising tool for creating scenic material, in connection with education, training and production.

I don't know if the RespOnce system could be referred to as *Research* in a traditional way. Nevertheless it is my assumption that the system represents a tool to develop, follow and document the creative process in a way that makes it useful for both the artist and the researcher – among other things because it describes how to trace and to handle the associative "Jump Cuts" that so often occurs in the process.