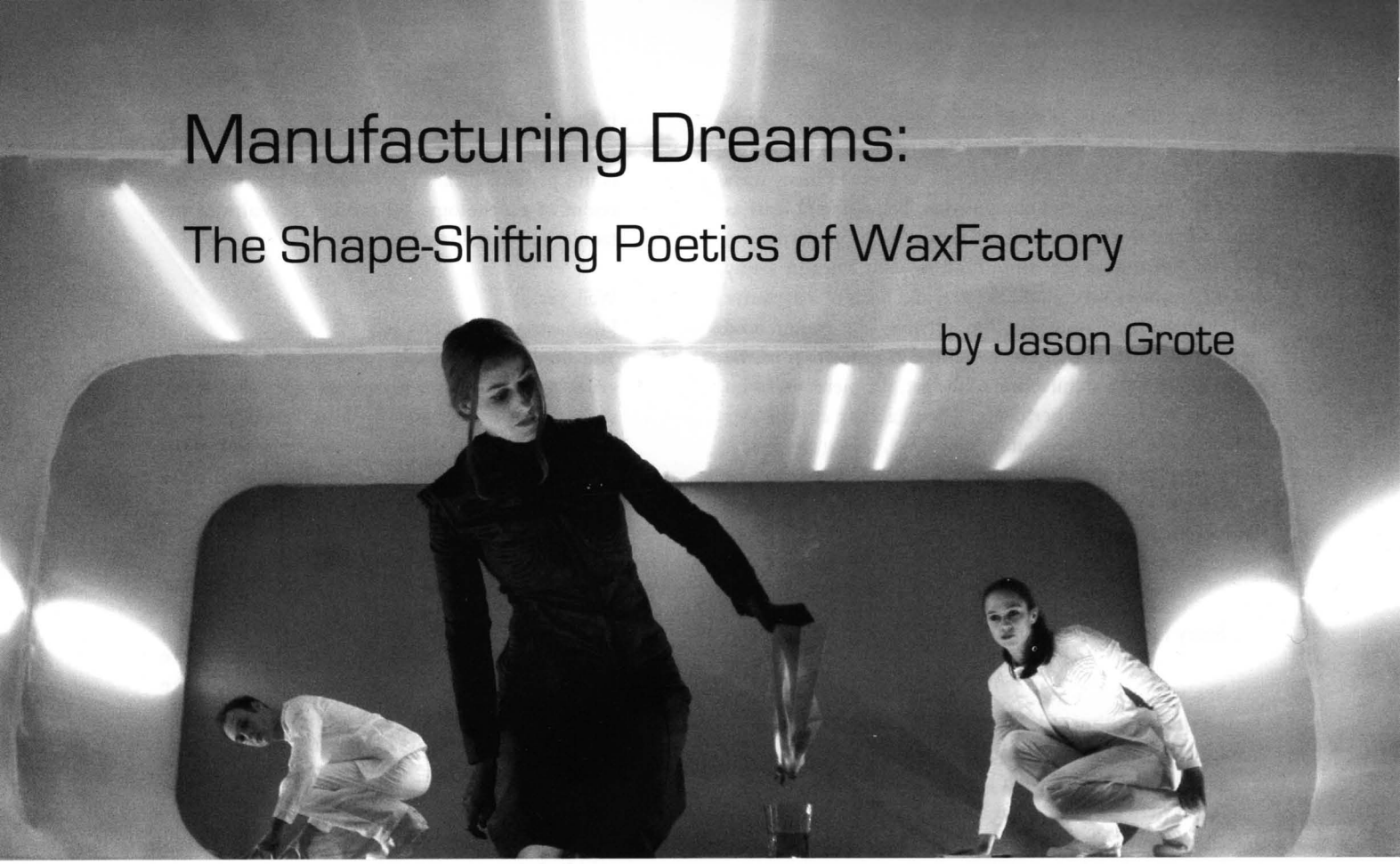
Manufacturing Dreams:

The Shape-Shifting Poetics of WaxFactory

by Jason Grote



In the 2005 Act French Festival production of WaxFactory's multimedia performance ...*She Said* (a meditation on Marguerite Duras's novel *Destroy, She Said*), the viewer enters the hollow industrial space of The Brooklyn Lyceum and first notices a sort of stage-within-a-stage. Inside a black box space that would be familiar to attendees of alternative theatre throughout much of the world, there is another, smaller proscenium stage, a space resembling a stark black and white diorama. This playing area is distinctly sculptural, its cool modernism reminiscent of the architecture of Eero Saarinen, or Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. Director Ivan Talijancic and designers Ursic & Batistic modeled the space purgatorial, like the liminal spaces of waiting rooms and airports. Concentric layers of white fabric create an illusion of extended dimension, as if we are looking into a deep tunnel, finally ending at a movie screen at the back of the playing area. The next thing one notices is a long table placed approximately at the lip of the stage; the center of the table is left empty, as an adjunct to the playing space. On either side of the long table sit banks of technicians seated in front of sleek, glowing laptop computers. The laptops are working, screens containing images that are detectable even when the theatre is dark. One cannot tell exactly what they are being used for, but assume they are for sound, lighting, and video. However, the colors and patterns add an extra layer to the aesthetics of the playing space. The visible technicians and computers are not merely a 21st century version of Constructionism or the Verfremsdungeffekt à la Meyerhold or Brecht (though they are that, too), but spectacles in and of themselves, complementing, if not competing with, the large screen at the back of the stage. If one looked hard enough, one might see a smaller version of the movie screen's images on one of the laptop screens. As director Ivan Talijancic put it to me,

> In terms of theatrical tradition, there is a Brechtian element that is involved in the choice to have the entire technical crew placed before the first row, in the full view of the audience. This creates an inherent conflict, an ambiguity, in that we are making the spectators aware that they are in the theatre, we are creating theatrical illusion, and destroying it almost at the same time in which it is made. It's like making these mesmerizing soap bubbles, and bursting them on the spot.

Multimedia theatre is nothing new, of course. At its best, it is elegant and beautiful, a similar experience to dance or visual art—the joy of pure aesthetics, perhaps with some narrative thrown in, often as a secondary concern. At its worst, it tends to suffer from a sort of overly busy maximalism that proves itself overwhelming; not only is the audience "alienated" (a slight mistranslation of Brecht, whose Verfremsdungeffekt is closer in spirit to "making the familiar strange"), but shut out entirely by visual and aural over-stimulation and a near-total absence of narrative.

Photo 1: Dion Doulis (as Man), Erika Latta (as M), and Katarina Stegnar (as Woman).

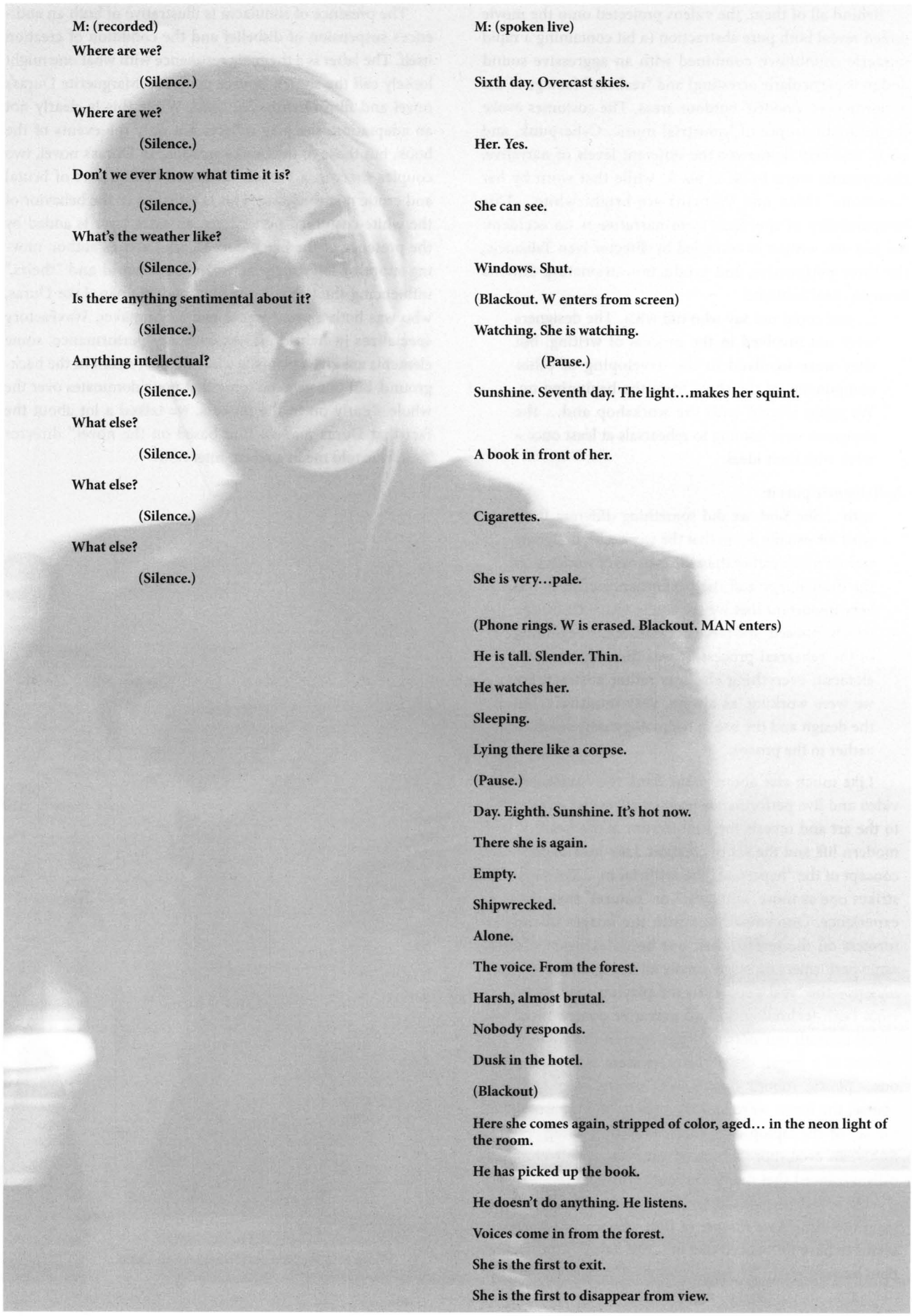
All photos: Tasja Keetman

...She Said, like much of WaxFactory's arresting work, clearly belongs in the former category. In *...She Said*, there are indeed multiple layers of alienation. The piece in many ways exists as pure image and composition, belonging at least as much to the world of visual art as it does to performance. But the performers are committed to their lines in a way that echoes more naturalistic theatre, and hints of a narrative arc bubble up periodically, though they are fragmented by technical effects and the structural composition of the piece. Beyond the architecture of the set, the piece works on multiple layers—one performer (WaxFactory co-founder Erika Latta, as M) comes out to "our" level, giving the closest thing to a naturalistic performance one finds in *...She Said*, drinking and smoking in the blank central space of the technicians' table. In a segment inspired by a filmed interview with Duras, she gives the following speech:

> Sorry I'm late.
>
> Yes, well...
> During that time. I let myself drift along. Because I had used a certain emptiness on me as a starting point of the book. I can't justify that now, after the fact. There are things that are very obscure. Which aren't clear to me...even now. But which I want to leave like that. It doesn't interest me to clear them up.
>
> In the book...there is a sort of super-exposition of certain things, and the intrusion of the unreal, but not a voluntary one. That is to say that when it happens I leave it in. I don't try to pass it off as realism. How about I use the word "surreality"? It is not psychological in any way. We are not in the realm of psychology. We are in the realm of the tactile. Yes, that's how I see it.
>
> Well, yes...
> I do have certain habits.
> You don't find solitude, you create it...it doesn't grow on trees. I shut myself in, close the doors, shut off my voice, stay up late, smoke a lot of cigarettes...have a drink...or two... I am human for god's sake. When you're alone like that you can easily lose your bearings.
>
> I was very frightened while I was writing it. I was fear itself. I can't tell you what state I was in. A genuine fear though. Or else the fear of being overcome by this...numbness. I had no idea where it would take me...or else I was afraid I would wake up. And at the same time I was completely free. But frightened to death of being free.

Behind her (in the "diorama"), Dion Doulis and Katarina Stegnar act out stylized scenes of intimacy and brutality. The relationship between Latta and the people on stage is more implied than stated, but it seems evident nonetheless: to oversimplify, she is a sort of author, and they are her "creations." This becomes evident as early as the second scene of the play, in which M "creates" the characters of Man and Woman in a dialogue with herself:

Photo 2: Latta (as M) in front of *...She Said* video.



M: (recorded)

Where are we?

(Silence.)

Where are we?

(Silence.)

Don't we ever know what time it is?

(Silence.)

What's the weather like?

(Silence.)

Is there anything sentimental about it?

(Silence.)

Anything intellectual?

(Silence.)

What else?

(Silence.)

What else?

(Silence.)

What else?

(Silence.)

M: (spoken live)

Sixth day. Overcast skies.

Her. Yes.

She can see.

Windows. Shut.

(Blackout. W enters from screen)

Watching. She is watching.

(Pause.)

Sunshine. Seventh day. The light…makes her squint.

A book in front of her.

Cigarettes.

She is very…pale.

(Phone rings. W is erased. Blackout. MAN enters)

He is tall. Slender. Thin.

He watches her.

Sleeping.

Lying there like a corpse.

(Pause.)

Day. Eighth. Sunshine. It's hot now.

There she is again.

Empty.

Shipwrecked.

Alone.

The voice. From the forest.

Harsh, almost brutal.

Nobody responds.

Dusk in the hotel.

(Blackout)

Here she comes again, stripped of color, aged… in the neon light of the room.

He has picked up the book.

He doesn't do anything. He listens.

Voices come in from the forest.

She is the first to exit.

She is the first to disappear from view.

Behind all of them, the videos projected onto the movie screen reveal both pure abstraction (a bit containing a rapid numeric countdown combined with an aggressive sound design is particularly arresting) and "realistic" footage of the performers in wooded, outdoor areas. The costumes evoke the futuristic tropes of Industrial music, Cyberpunk, and sci-fi, and help demarcate the different levels of narrative; the costume worn by M is black, while that worn by her "creations" (Man and Woman) are bright white. This inseparability of spectacle from narrative is no accident: the text was written or compiled by director Ivan Talijancic, the three performers, and production dramaturg Simona Semenic. Said Semenic:

> ... one could not say who did what. The designers were not involved in the process of writing, but they were involved in the developing of other components of the show from the beginning on. We again started with the workshop and... the designers were coming to rehearsals at least once a week with their ideas.

As Talijancic puts it:

> with ...*She Said*, we did something different from what we usually do, in that the work with designers started much earlier than the process of working on the dramaturgy and the performance of it. It was very important that we create the visual landscape which "housed" the piece because, at the beginning of the rehearsal process, it was the only concrete element; everything else was rather abstract. So, we were working, as always, very intuitively, but the design and the use of technology were resolved earlier in the process.

Like much else about ...*She Said*, the combination of video and live performance problematizes our relationship to the art and reveals the simulacrum at the heart of both modern life and the act of creation. Like Jean Baudrillard's concept of the "hyperreal," the artificial in ...*She Said* often strikes one as more "authentic" or "natural" than the lived experience. One empathizes with the images of the performers on the screen, then one becomes aware of those same performers on stage, finally all but ignoring the technicians—the "real people" in the playing space who, free from both technological and narrative contrivance, tend to fall beneath our notice. When seen in the video, in the context of a forest, the performers seem oddly incongruous - plastic, robotic figures in a "natural" setting. But of course, the forest we're looking at is no more natural than the set or the laptop computers; indeed, it is less so. It is, rather, an even more advanced simulation, so technologically advanced that it appears more real than the real people and objects before the viewer's eyes—or, to use a phrase from the film *Blade Runner* (a film whose costume design seems to have influenced that of ...*She Said*), "more human than human."

The presence of simulacra is illustrative of both an audience's suspension of disbelief and the condition of creation itself. The latter is a thematic resonance with what one might loosely call the show's "source material," Marguerite Duras's novel and film *Destroy, She Said*. While this is clearly not an adaptation, the play reflects not only the events of the book, but those of the book's creation. In Duras's novel, two couples meet in a French hotel and form a sort of brutal and erotic micro-society. This is reflected in the behavior of the white-costumed performers; an extra layer is added by the presence of the black-clad M, who acts as author, moving more or less freely between "our" world and "theirs," influencing the behavior of Man and Woman. Like Duras, who was both a prose writer and a filmmaker, WaxFactory specializes in hybrid art. As with any performance, some elements are given primacy while others remain in the background, but one gets the sense that none dominates over the whole. "Early on in the process, we talked a lot about the fact that Duras made a film based on the novel," director Talijancic told me in a recent interview:

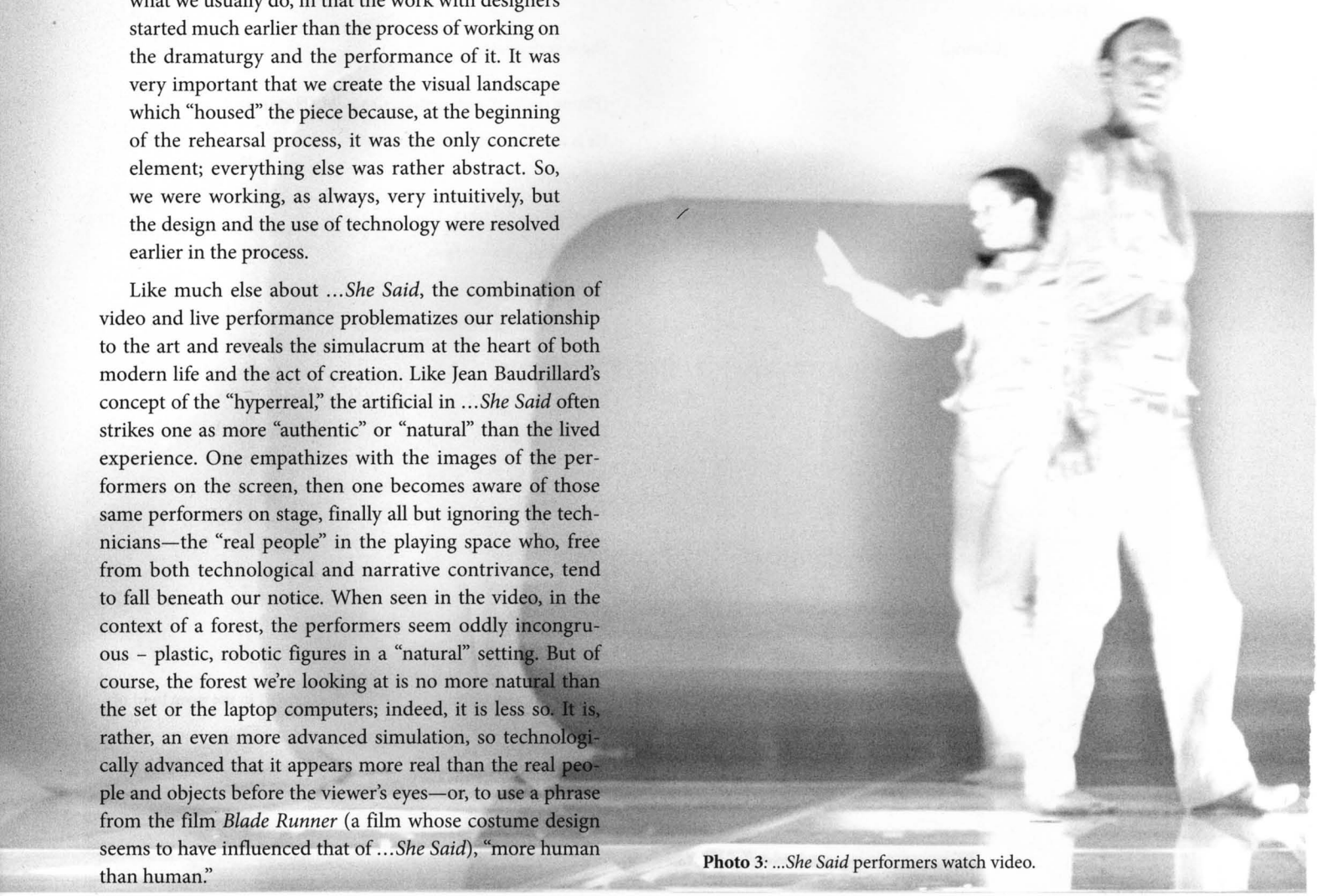


Photo 3: ...*She Said* performers watch video.

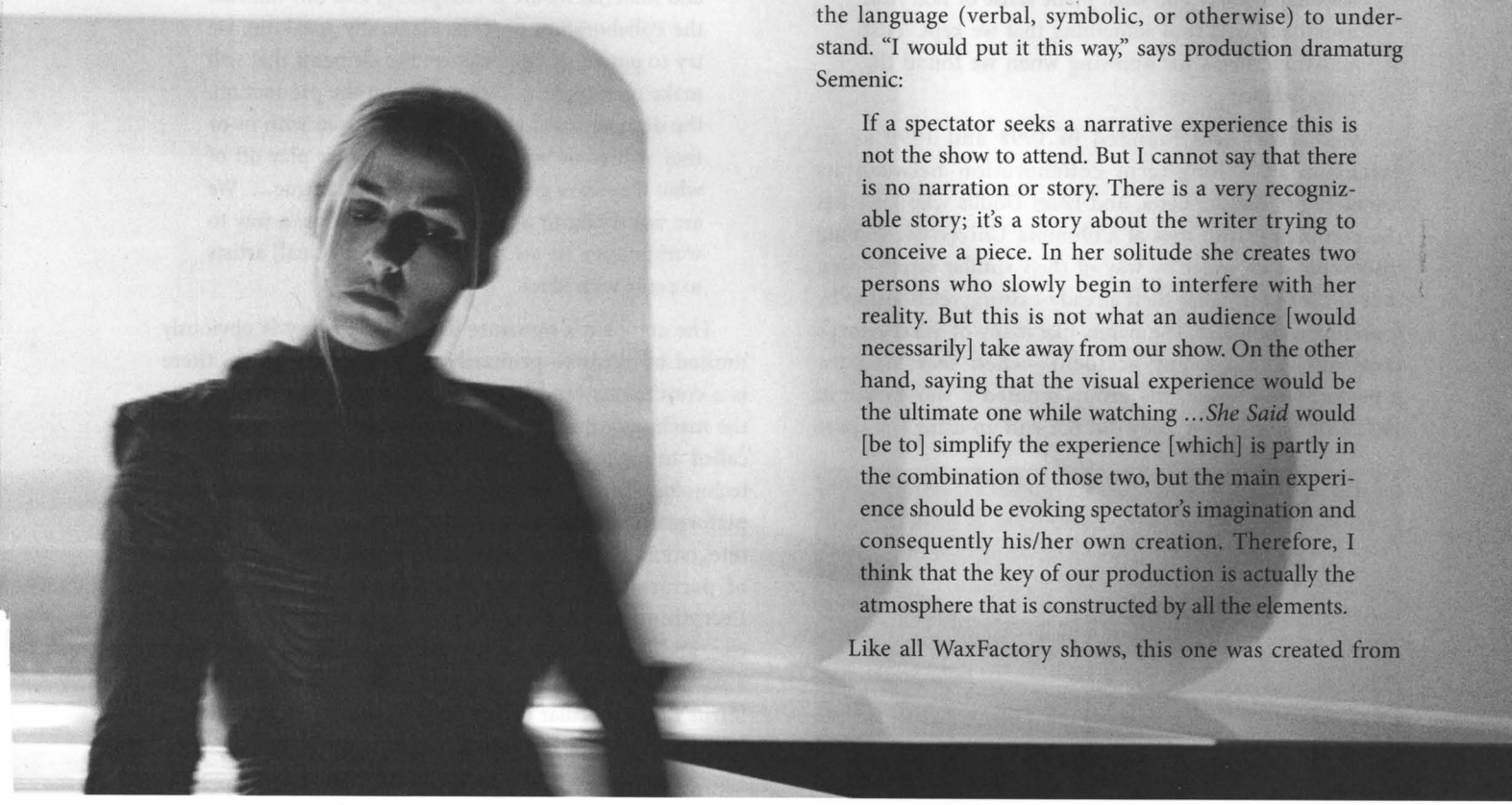
> This is something that appealed to us because our approach is inherently cinematographic; we use the language of cinema on the stage, our pieces are always conceived and edited in this way... Not only through the use of film and video, but also in acting, in the composition and sequencing, in the use of sound, and the way in which we invite the audience to watch. This piece uses surround sound, which can be disorienting but also it creates a sense of atmosphere, a landscape in which one can get lost.

Indeed, the audience in *...She Said* continually experiences the sensation of getting lost and finding itself again; WaxFactory is not shy about using (and, in most cases, reconfiguring) familiar tropes. These include not only the futuristic set and costumes, but the mannerisms of the performers—for example, during the "interview" with M quoted above, she looks like nothing more than a bored, artistically frustrated French writer of the type we have seen many times before on film—consumed with nihilism and ennui, she smokes languidly, drinking unidentified brown liquid out of a whiskey glass. The incongruity of this postwar "artiste" trope with the black leather S&M costume worn by Latta creates an almost comical juxtaposition, and one that is truly Brechtian, in that it makes us see both the characterization and the design elements in a new light.

Much has been written about the lack of meaning in contemporary society and its influence on contemporary theatre; in many ways, we are still living in the shadow of the Existentialist and Absurdist movements of postwar Europe. In kitchen-sink dramas, naturalistically drawn characters search for meaning and lament its lack. In avant-garde performance, directors or companies extend that lack to the performance itself, eschewing narrative or established performative technique in favor of seeming randomness. However, in *...She Said*, narrative is not abandoned but fragmented. Like the design elements, the familiar and unfamiliar are juxtaposed, or old elements emerge in odd or unfamiliar configurations. In a Baudrillardian sense, the world of WaxFactory's shows is like ours: it does not suffer from a dearth of meaning but from an overload of it. Elements of narrative emerge, and we have moments in which we can empathize and relate to *...She Said* just as fully as we would a standard linear narrative, but those moments quickly vanish in favor of another, unfamiliar sort of meaning, defined by the play itself. As audience members, this leaves us with a number of choices. We may try to divine the meaning of the "new meaning;" we can accept it as non-narrative and purely aesthetic; or we may acknowledge that the spectacle before us means something that we do not yet possess the language (verbal, symbolic, or otherwise) to understand. "I would put it this way," says production dramaturg Semenic:

> If a spectator seeks a narrative experience this is not the show to attend. But I cannot say that there is no narration or story. There is a very recognizable story; it's a story about the writer trying to conceive a piece. In her solitude she creates two persons who slowly begin to interfere with her reality. But this is not what an audience [would necessarily] take away from our show. On the other hand, saying that the visual experience would be the ultimate one while watching *...She Said* would [be to] simplify the experience [which] is partly in the combination of those two, but the main experience should be evoking spectator's imagination and consequently his/her own creation. Therefore, I think that the key of our production is actually the atmosphere that is constructed by all the elements.

Like all WaxFactory shows, this one was created from



the ground up, with all (or almost all) of the collaborators participating equally. "We are drawn to working with artists who are not necessarily working in the theatre field," says Talijancic. "They have something new to bring, they open doors and create space for new ideas. And that interest in taking up all these different ideas was at the root of what brought us together. We discovered that simultaneously." Instead of more traditional adaptations, in which the piece is either rearticulated for a different medium with the narrative more or less intact, or even "free" adaptations, in which a playwright, director or ensemble deliberately deconstructs elements of a pre-existing text, WaxFactory created the show in a manner not unlike playwright Caryl Churchill's well-known collaborations with Joint Stock. Talijancic again:

> We used certain ideas and images in the book that haunted us, and proceeded to obsessively investigate, to understand why those elements managed to strike such a chord. [We worked] in a room for three months in Slovenia, in the dead of winter, discussing the meaning of writing, of creating, of conflict. We used excerpts of the text from the novel, but a great deal of text was generated in rehearsals ... improvised by the performers, sampled, pulled out from other materials, both from interviews with Duras as well as other sources. So we created a lot of mess in rehearsals, then we'd walk away and bring back something more structured to work with the following day. And then we'd argue about what should go where and what made sense or not. And eventually we'd find something that we kept. That was the criteria for knowing when we found the right balance.

WaxFactory was founded in 1998 and 1999 as an extension of a long-term collaboration between its founders (Talijancic, Latta, and Dion Doulis who later left the company), who met at Columbia University. Having discovered each other by way of their similar sensibilities, they chose to formalize their already-existing relationship by founding a company. The name, like many of WaxFactory's creations, was a happy accident—when searching for a performance space, the group scouted a warehouse in Hoboken, New Jersey. They did not end up using the space for anything, but they noticed two faded slogans on the side of the building. While neither could be read in their entirety, the words "wax" and "factory" were placed one over the other. This had a metaphoric connection to the group's work: wax is pliable, malleable, shape-shifting. And there is the use of the word that refers to a manner of speaking: "She waxed poetical." The word "factory" has an obvious connotation in reference to the company—the art they make is as much "manufactured" as it is "created," a creature of the "machine" as well as of the "soul," to the extent that either distinction can ever really be made.

The interests of the founding artists reflected the diversity and hybridity of the work that they would go on to make. Talijancic was studying science and had little interest in pursuing a theatrical career until attending college. Latta was and is the group's primary performer, but she remains equally interested in photography and installation art. Doulis, who studied film, was also interested in live performance. The group chose live performance as their primary avenue because of its existence as a hybrid art form—even in traditional naturalistic plays or musicals, theatre potentially combines art, architecture, fashion, sound/music, literature, and media, and, importantly for all of them, it does so in such a way that the hegemony of text is not dominant. Often, the company views its productions using an orchestral metaphor—all of the languages in which it communicates are equally important, but at different times, some are louder and some are softer. Says Latta:

> Every show is different depending on the subject and material we are investigating, and this informs the collaboration process. Generally speaking, we try to put equal emphasis on the elements that will make up a piece.... Depending on the production, the designers will either be in the room with us or they will come with their ideas and we play off of what they have given – it's always a dialogue.... We are not trying to teach a method or show a way to work; rather, we are trusting the [individual] artists to come with ideas.

The company's signature use of technology is obviously limited by means—primarily money. Beyond this, there is a continuous (and largely successful) effort to integrate the machinery into the performance in what would be best called an organic way. One drawback to using multimedia technology is its propensity to eclipse the other elements of performance. It can become a gimmick, an end in itself. The integration, not only of technology but of all of the elements of performance, is a serious concern for WaxFactory. Everything in the shows is in the context of everything else, and it shows. In *...She Said*, the company has created a sort of non-narrative narrative—the viewer very quickly learns the vernacular of performance (the show is under an hour) and applies it to the experience of the show, taking something that is as powerful as linear storytelling, and in

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many of the same ways, but is still fundamentally different.

In a WaxFactory show, technology is not an adjunct or a piece of spectacle, but a fundamental part of the fabric of the show—one could scarcely imagine a pre-technological version of much of what they do. In their production of Heiner Müller's *Quartet* (2002), the set itself was an architectural installation. Surveillance cameras were installed throughout the space, which captured images of the actors. The footage was then edited in real time, with animations added using custom software developed for the show. The images were transmitted onto two plasma screens, and were distinctly cinematographic—often, they were extreme close-ups, and sound and image were processed to be distinctly unlike the live actors one watched. The piece was so intensely layered that it was extraordinarily difficult to mount, requiring three different residencies in order to complete.

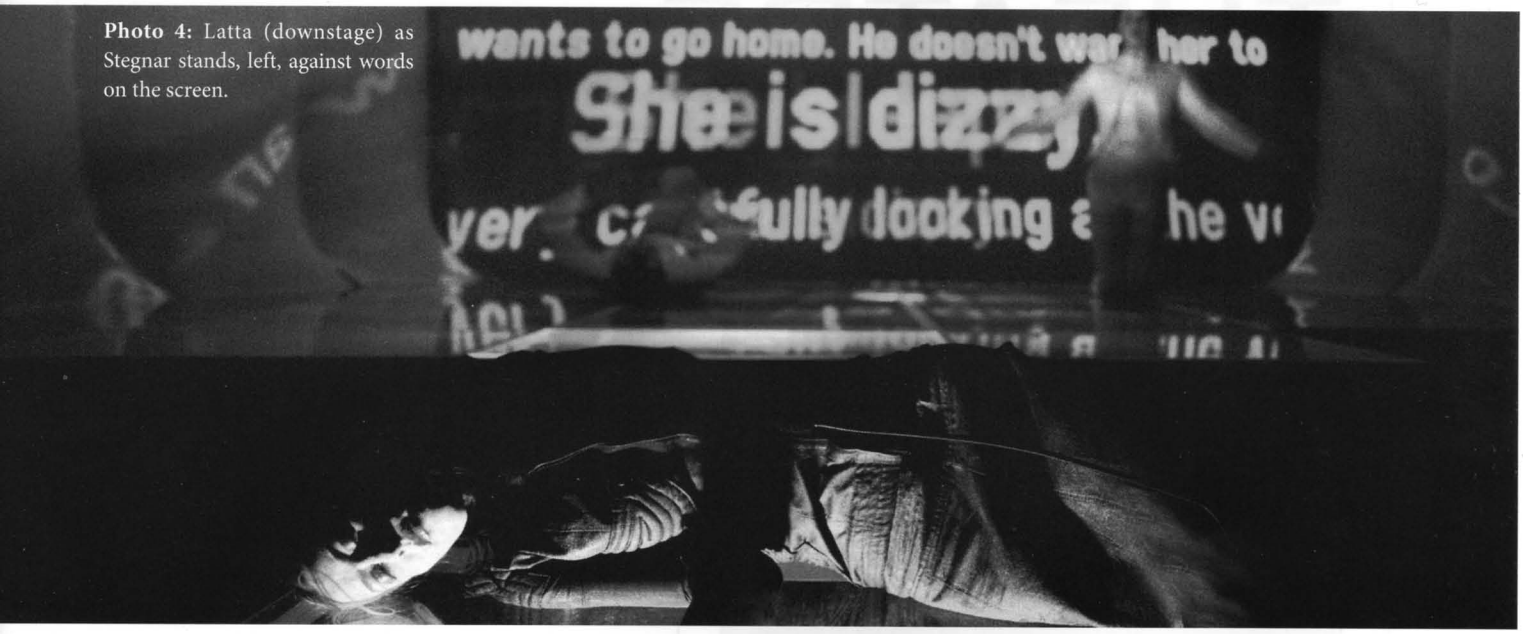

Photo 4: Latta (downstage) as Stegnar stands, left, against words on the screen.

In the final analysis, WaxFactory is not interested in jettisoning narrative or language, but in redefining them. In their version of Ibsen's *Lady From The Sea* (2001), thirteen spaces in Brooklyn's massive Old American Can Factory were occupied by separate installations, some performative and some entirely visual. Each audience member was free to choose his or her own narrative, dependent not only on spatial and chronological order, but also on how long he or she spent in each space. Each piece ran on a continual five-minute loop, for about an hour. As Erika Latta says of 1999's *Le Jardin Aveugle (Blind Garden)*, from New Zealand novelist Janet Frame's *Scented Garden for the Blind*,

> language is important, but it is equal to the expression of the body, and in each production it comes out in a different way. In France, we used no technology and used the language of the street and the body to express the text. Each piece you make speaks to you in what you are going to bring out and what you will show. I think we listen to this more than deciding ahead of time how the piece will be expressed. Sometimes the text pops over the visual world, sometimes it recedes and sometimes it is blended inside the other elements of the stage. In the end we are telling a story, whether linear or not.... With our work, we are trying to get at the unexplainable, those moments that language cannot touch.... And this is a very vulnerable place to find yourself in when you are creating original work.

Production credits for *... She Said*

Inspired by *Détruire... dit-elle (Destroy, She Said)* by Marguerite Duras

Directed by Ivan Talijancic

Co-production with Cankarjev Dom and Mini Teater (Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Performers: Dion Doulis, Erika Latta, Katarina Stegnar
Dramaturg: Simona Semenic
Architecture: Ursic + Batistic
Surround sound design: Random Logic
Costumes: Silvio Vujicic
Video: Sebastijan Vukusic
Film production: STRUP
Lighting: Jaka Simenc
Technical direction: Igor Remeta
Executive producer: Simona Semenic
Producer (New York): Renata Petroni
Producer (for WaxFactory): Ivan Talijancic