ANT HAMPTON

Entrevista realizada por Miguel Ángel Melgares el 8 de marzo de 2021

Interview conducted by Miguel Ángel Melgares on March 8th, 2021

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ABSTRACT: Ant Hampton (b. 1975, lives and works in Germany) is a British artist, writer, and performance maker. His career began in 1998 under the name of Rotozaza, a performance-based project which ended up spanning theatre, installation, intervention and writing-based works. Since 2007, his Autoteatro series explores a new kind of performance whereby audience members perform the piece themselves, usually for each other. Most often, this projects have involved guiding people through unrehearsed performance situations. Though varied in tone and content, his work has consistently played with a tension between liveness and automation.

Regularly Hampton collaborates with diverse artists, and recently he has worked with Glen Neath, Joji Koyama, Sam Britton, Tim Etchells, Gert-Jan Stam, Britt Hatzius and Christophe Meierhans to create the works which continue to tour internationally: over 60 different language versions exist of the various Autoteatro productions created so far.

This interview explores Hampton's production processes and modes of presentation, and analyses a project that searches for live performance options without air travel. Faced with an unfolding climate catastrophe, and building on what the cultural sector have learnt during 2020's covid crisis, Hampton has initiated at Vidy Théâtre Lausanne the research project Showing without going. Their goal is to build a useful tool for artists and producers of live work; a catalogue of formats opening options for showing and sharing performances in far-off places without flying and without compromising on the uniqueness of the live encounter.

RESUMEN: Ant Hampton (1975) es un artista, escritor y creador de performances británico, que actualmente vive y trabaja en Alemania. Su carrera comenzó en 1998 bajo el nombre de Rotozaza, un proyecto basado en la performance que acabó abarcando obras de teatro, instalación, intervención y escritura. Desde 2007, su serie Autoteatro explora un nuevo tipo de performance en la que el público interpreta la pieza, normalmente, para los demás. En la mayoría de los casos, se trata de guiar al publico a través de situaciones escénicas no ensayadas. Aunque el tono y el contenido son variados, su obra ha explorado constantemente la tensión entre lo presencial y lo automatizado.

Hampton colabora regularmente con diversos artistas y recientemente ha trabajado con Glen Neath, Joji Koyama, Sam Britton, Tim Etchells, Gert-Jan Stam, Britt Hatzius y Christophe Meierhans para crear un amplio catálogo de obras que gira internacionalmente: hasta la fecha existen más de 60 versiones en diferentes idiomas de las producciones de Autoteatro.

Esta entrevista explora los procesos de producción y modos de presentación del trabajo de Hampton, al mismo tiempo que recoge una nueva propuesta en la que busca opciones de realizar performances en vivo sin necesidad de viajar en avión. Ante el desarrollo de la catástrofe climática y basándose en lo que el sector cultural ha aprendido durante la crisis de covid de 2020, Hampton ha iniciado en Vidy Théâtre Lausanne el proyecto de investigación Showing without Going. Su objetivo es construir una herramienta útil para los artistas y productores de obras en vivo, un catálogo de formatos que abra opciones para mostrar y compartir performances en lugares lejanos sin volar y sin comprometer la singularidad del encuentro en vivo.

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Miguel Ángel Melgares. Good morning Ant. First, thank you very much for accepting the invitation. As I mentioned previously, this interview will be part of an academic journal published by the University of Granada called *SOBRE, Artistic Practices and Politics of Editing*. The present issue (number 7) addresses the relation between performance and edition. We are interested in exploring different aspects of this relation, ranging from documentation to archiving processes, exploring publishing strategies within the field, and analysing different production modes taking place within the performing arts nowadays. Regarding your body of work, we are interested in how you keep questioning performative structures and challenging your audience with a minimum means of production.

Ant Hampton. It is interesting. I'm just starting to work with new producers, who are starting a new company in Berlin. For them, it is very challenging to understand that historically at least, I had never needed a producer, at least not in the way they understand it. Most of the groundwork that traditionally producers do, like hands-on production work is totally hardwired in the job that I see myself doing as an artist. A big reason for that is because one of the most important things I consider when making work is an economy of means. Basically, doing a lot with very little. And the little that I do have is always an artistic consideration. Even when I do stage work, I don't usually have a lighting designer or a technical director. I often end up simply asking the technicians to set some lights so the audience can see. I like to keep things simple, and not just for practical reasons, but because I have an aversion to work that "shows the money" - when you get a feeling of it being flaunted;there's this pride between the lines of slickness. I'm very allergic to all that.

MM. I wonder if this allergic reaction to megalomaniac theatre productions happens to you as a maker, or do you also experience it as an audience?

AH. Both, but definitely as a maker. When I was very young I went to a school in Paris, École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq. Lecoq himself ran the school for 40 years. It has its base in physical theatre, drawing on all kinds of things like the clown, the grotesque, Buffon, *Commedia dell'arte*, Greek tragedy and so on. Still, his real focus was about how do you make work from nothing, how do you do work with other people, so I was taught the basics for collaboration: how to listen, how to be surprised by other people's ideas, or to pretend to like other people's ideas in order to facilitate the dynamics of collaboration! When coming out of a traditional drama school, usually actors wonder where to get a job, whereas when you come out from Lecoq, you get together and do some work; you don't need anybody else. It gives you autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Another thing that triggered my interest in autonomic strategies while producing work were my friends at that time, electronic musicians in the mid 90's, making techno. I'd look at their process, they would just wake up in the morning, switch the computer on and start working in their pyjamas, and take the computers around with them. At the end of the process, they were able to give me a CD, and that was their work. Whereas with my process as a theatre maker, I had to get rehearsal space, get stuff there, motivate actors, and then do the work; and when it is over, it is gone. I wondered '*What is this? It's not very gratifying*'. I dreamt of a different model that would allow me both the process and the outcome that I was envious of with electronic musicians. Their process is less traumatic than the theatre-making experience, which I've always partly loved, but I've also partly felt scarred and injured by it. If I make a piece with performers usually I need some time to step away from that and do something more personal, like writing. The editing process is interesting, because a lot of my work is, in the end, audio editing. Text editing and writing come first though.

MM. The reference to music production makes total sense because a lot of the work you propose also consists of generating sound files as a strategy to create specific modes of spectatorship. For me personally, coming from a visual art context and working with performance makers with strong scenographic elements and heavy productions, it feels like a breath of fresh air to experience one of your works. You manage to deconstruct the process of what theatre and performance are to their essence. Could you share how you started working on your instruction performances?

AH. Rather than modes of spectatorship, I think of it more as modes of experiencing something live, which somehow bends spectatorship into something like being a witness. When I first started working with instructions, I didn't know what I was doing. Shortly after, I discovered Forced Entertainment and the writings of Tim Etchells, which really articulated what I was doing, and made me realise that I was not only falling into a long tradition of non-representational theatre — or Postdramatic theatre — but his writing literally freed me up. It doesn't matter what you call your work; what is important is that you have an ongoing inquiry, a red thread where you consolidate your own history, interests and difficulties as an artist.

The very first piece I did before I knew what I was doing was *BLOKE* (1999), a reaction to an invitation to make something for a festival at Theatre de l'Échangeur in Paris. At that point, I had made a couple of pieces on my own under the name of Rotozaza. I was not only interested in site-specific work but also in music-specific and person-specific. I was enjoying writing for people who I loved. I liked writing in response to certain people, texts that only made sense for them to say. While thinking about who I could write for in Paris I thought of my friend Henri Taïb, because somehow he will be the last person you would imagine to see on stage, easygoing, very intelligent and with a sideways view on things. I knew he didn't want the responsibility to be a performer, so I had to think of a strategy on how to get him on stage. I decided to tell him what to do at the moment and to create a list of instructions that he would hear in the moment without any need for rehearsal. I had to explain that to the audience, so they would understand that they were watching somebody who is discovering everything at the same time as they are. Working with my friend, the musician Sam Britton, we decided that it would be interesting if the text was recorded, if the voice could somehow sound very present

Figuras: *The Quiet Volumen.* Ant Hampton y Tim Etchells. Imágenes de Lorena Fernandez y Lorenza Daverio

in the room, and we ended up using another friend with an unplaceable accent. The voice track that was recorded was very key because it set up what followed after that piece: the friction between something that you know is fixed and unchangeable, and something that is the complete opposite to that, somebody unrehearsed, dealing with the decision making process in the now, in front of you. This is not about improvisation in the traditional theatrical sense, where you watch actors doing things you can't do, but quite the opposite; you rather watch people that are not actors, doing things that you can totally imagine doing. It is something as simple as '*Stand on the X mark, Look this way, Smile, Stop smiling*', etc. You hear the instructions, and you see the results already. It is not about being surprised or impressed; it is more about sharing the journey with this person.

MM. Is it here where the series *Autoteatro* begins?

AH. Format-wise this was the beginning of this long journey that hasn't ended. It took me a while to understand that it was not just a single show, and after a couple of years, I realised that I should actually try to explore more working with instructions and unrehearsed performances. Also, because there was something about that piece that was more exciting than anything else that I was doing. In 2003 I did a research period involving different artists thinking of ways of cataloguing all the theatre and performance possibilities of this format, and the implications of working like this, because I thought there was a lot more that I could do. So we made a lot of work. There were a bunch of people sitting around theorising and thinking, which at the moment was kind of a taboo for someone coming from physical theatre working on embodied knowledge. I was never really good at that, I was more of an intellectual who wished to put together a thinking group.

We did several performances until the presentation of *Etiquette* (2007), officially the first *Autoteatro* performance, which I did with Silvia Mercuriali, my artistic collaborator at Rotozaza until 2008. Years before, in 2001, we had already tried to make this piece, the concept and the structure was completely there, the two people facing each other, the headphones, but at that time, it was really hard because we didn't have the editing tools to play around and get good at it. I could have hired someone in, but the work is so bound up with the imagination and the processes of writing that it is really challenging to figure out how to balance all the components and make it a meaningful experience. These days the work is easier. I'm better now imagining how it would be; I do a lot of the work in my head.

In the sense of the live experience, I realised that the definition of *Autoteatro*, it is important to be defined as a relational thing. It is not something that you do on your own. It was tempting to propose pieces that could work as a solo piece, but to me, what makes it interesting from a spectatorship point of view, is that you are getting something from a performer who is your partner. Your decision-making process has to relate to the decision-making processes your partner is making. Over the years, I've become interested in the ethics of participation and the social implication and the problematics of it.

MM. Since you open this issue of the ethics of participation, I wonder how you approach the broad spectrum of participation in the performing arts. Are you talking about the ideas of the performance delegation introduced by Claire Bishop? Or perhaps about Jacques Rancière emancipation process? How do you position your own ethics within this realm?

AH. Well, I often want to talk about what the work *isn't* about. Because the most common misunderstanding is that the instructions imply some kind of experiment in remote authority and the limits of free will, in the vein of the Milgram experiments.. My reaction to that is: then don't try to read a book, because implicit in that format is the imperative to read sentences from left to right, decode the words and turn pages. For me, this is just a simple agreement of collaboration you have to make with an artist and with a certain format. It is fundamentally about trust. It took me a while to understand that the red thread through my work is not the instructions and the unrehearsed stage, as it is creating these spaces of trust that need to be negotiated live.

In the piece I did with Rita Pauls, *Mund-Stück* (2019), we decide to learn to speak German by memorising the text by heart. We decided to go to the centre of Germany. When you search for Germany in the Apple maps, there is a pin that falls down. We went there, in the middle of nowhere, we walked to the nearest road, and we started hitchhiking randomly for one week. Every time someone would pick us up, we would ask that person '*What do you feel needs to be said?*', and explain that we'd like to record the answer, and then learn it by heart, as a way of assimilating and learning the language. In Germany, this question is kind of a taboo in itself because of the postwar reality here to moderate what you might want to say, and of course that's now breaking down by the paranoid populistic tendencies. People would answer in various ways, some saying that they didn't understand the question, others having a rant, and others would really perform their own understanding of the problematics at play at that moment. They were all driving, so they were looking ahead, and there was no need to look at each other: the psychological thing with hitchhiking where people feel able to speak freely to people they know will not meet again. There were many complexities at play in this speech-act, which we then spent six months learning totally verbatim with all the breathing and pauses. Then we performed that live, on stage, standing next to each other, speaking in sync for 45 minutes. That is how we learned German.

MM. By having experienced some of your pieces, I understand the idea of trust you are interested in. To me, it is clear that your work doesn't try to force a performative mechanism, but on the contrary, it feels more like a guided process, a gentle companion.

AH. I think that especially is the case with *The Quiet Volume* (2010) and *Not to Scale* (2020), two of the pieces I did with Tim Etchells. Tim is at the more sensitive end of the scale in terms of being asked to do stuff. We had to go carefully. Some of my other work maybe pushes things a bit more. Generally, the agreement in visual arts leaves the individual spectator a bit more free to find their path through things.

From this visual art perspective, it is going to be the least guided experience. That is perhaps a reason why a lot of visual artists end up coming to performance because they probably do like the captive state and defined frame.

MM. Changing the topic. A few months ago, around January, I got an open call via email that caught my attention. Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne launched *Showing without going: Live performance options without air travel.* The call started with the following question: '*What are the options for creating, producing and touring live performance in a world where we need to drastically reduce our energy use?*' You posed this question in a crucial and critical period, when climate, health and social crises clash. Many other questions arise from this ethical conflict in a period that forces theatre structures — especially international festivals — to rethink the hypermobility that we have been suffering in the performance art circuit the last decade. What makes you initiate this project?

AH. A lot of my work can be shown without me going, and I'm aware that in the last few years, there are a lot of other people exploring this possibility. At the heart of *Showing Without Going* there is an attempt of cataloguing all the efforts and strategies that different artists do in thinking performance work where the artists present their work internationally without travelling. At a certain moment, I started writing a manifesto calling for an end to the flagship productions that organisations like Goethe Institute or British Council regularly send around the world to wow people with large scale spectacles. We need to ask ourselves questions about what that is. And especially, in terms of what theatre can do. Is it not just actually a sort of propagation of colonialist dynamics, or something much more prosaic and banal, in the line of advertising? It's seen as soft power but it's extremely destructive in terms of how much stuff is being created thoughtlessly and transported, and the number of people that are necessary. So it was a call for lighter work. Something more in line with what I see as an era of 'resource humility' we are moving into.

I'm aware that this proposition is a little dangerous as well; there are a lot of traps to fall into. I'm grateful to Jérôme Bel for the strong articulation of what is right, but also for falling into all the traps before us, so we could see where they are. Because there are lessons to be learned in terms of acknowledging white privilege and one's own privilege as an established straight white male artist. These ideas have been picked up on by several artists, including Mexican director Lázaro Gabino Rodríguez. We are facing a situation we have never been in before, and all these uncomfortable truths about who is speaking or who gets to be heard are all valid, but they don't answer the main problem and challenge. With the project at Vidy we have tried to focus on a more propositional, positive and imaginative approach, something that is useful for artists and curators who are interested in exploring that kind of work. If you are an activist and you want to organise effective protest strategies with people from other places, elements of this project could be used and adapted, because it's actually about developing skills for communicating liveness over distance. For me, liveness is more than the art of theatre, it is whatever is live, and we need to get better at doing this remotely.

MM. And how has been the response of the artistic community?

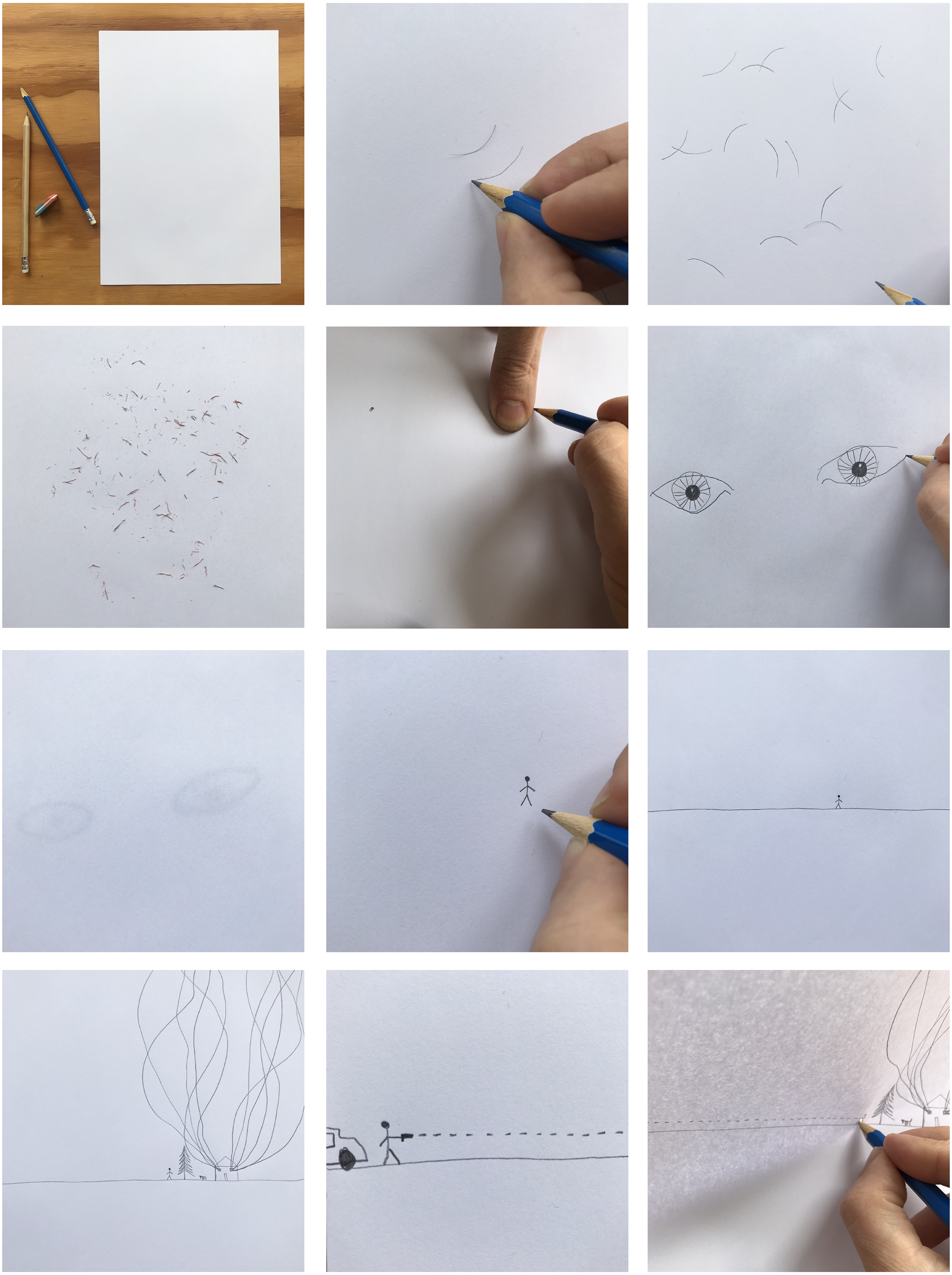
AH. So far, I haven't had any direct outrage. It has been extremely positive so far, and a lot of people have said that they are interested in connecting it to the many things that are going on already and building up a side database of parallel activity. This is just the beginning; right now, we are collecting whatever people want to put in the database, about 90 contributions. I haven't done that work myself, but I focused on launching it, articulating it and thinking through the database. The idea is to put together a working group in spring, people who must be interested in going deeper into it, organise the database and add everything else we can think of. Following that, the project will be turned into an online platform, launched and distributed with as many partners as possible. The database we have right now is a bit messy and has multiple entries that overlap. We have to go through that, but not with the intention of making critical judgments about the quality of the proposals, but more about the formats, like things that are not really live or if someone proposes watching *Hamlet* on your TV. Personally speaking, I'm really interested in work that is not necessarily digital.

MM. If I'm not wrong, in March, you presented *Not to Scale* at Santiago a Mil Festival in Chile. Dries Verhoeven, one of the artists with whom I'm currently collaborating, was also presenting his work *Guilty Landscapes.* For him, this presentation was an achievement and a milestone in his career because he showed this work for the first time without his technical team operating the quite complex performative set-up. The complexity is in the relationship between how to keep loyal to your artistic proposition while learning to trust the spare partner that needs to manage and locally produce the new version of the work.

AH. Isn't that a win-win situation? Once you get better at communicating what you are doing, and the festival gets better at listening and executing, suddenly you have a better collaborative muscle.

MM. If we think of renowned performance artists, in which the presence of the artist itself generates specific value through the economy of presenceness, do you think the idea of remote production processes is economically sustainable?

AH. It makes sense to speak about economic value. I was shy to speak about it, but now I'm more open to verbalising it: to me, it makes sense economically. I fell into a business model that I had no idea was about to be such good news. The people in the theatre industry who are able to do three or four shows running around the world at the same time are very few. Usually, it's huge companies that do that. But I've been doing that for about 15 years, doing multiple things at the same time. But it was never planned as a business model; it was an honest experiment that I thought was going to be limited to a few friends. But it works out. Of course, there are dangers. If you are lazy and you don't communicate well, and if the festival is busy and struggling and is unable to take care of it properly, it can be a disaster, and I've had those disasters. And it's really embarrassing, because people come back and say 'T*he headphones weren't*



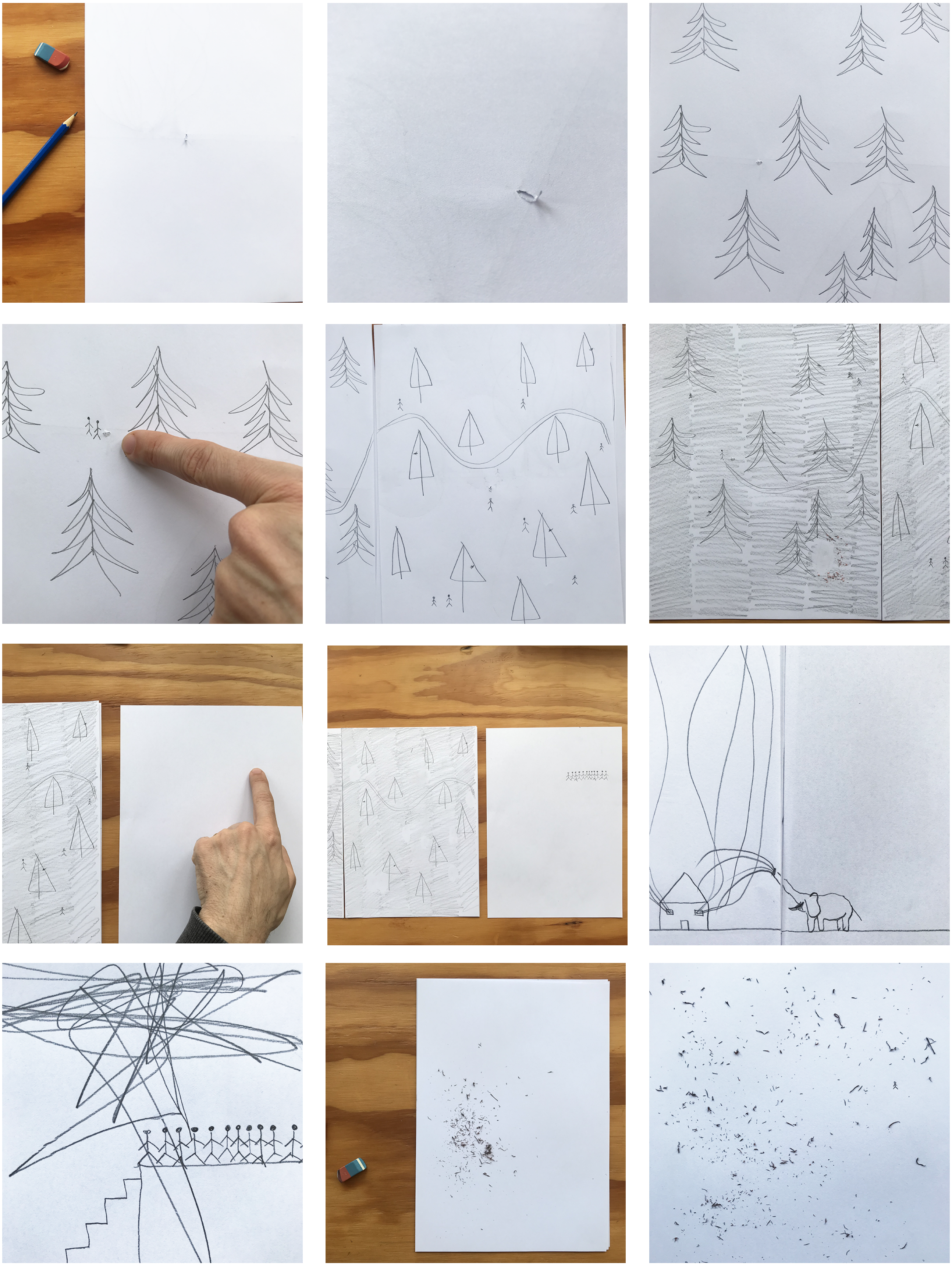


Figura: *Not to Scale*. Ant Hampton y Tim Etchells

working...'. So you learn to have a very special engagement with all the people involved in showing your work, from the curators to the technical team, volunteers, etc. They all get my personal phone number, so they can text or call me because they need to have an understanding of who I am, what I do, why I do it, and the reason for that piece. The first and essential thing is that they experience the piece. I talk a lot about this with my friend Kate McIntosh. She is very sensitive about the people who look after the work. People have the tendency to speak too much, to fill the silences, and actually, it is much better to have an awkward silence. Awkward silences are great to focus attention. Also, lately, my friend Stefan Kaegi is talking about the technical rider as an essential part of artistic scripting.

MM. For is really interesting to think about the technical rider as a sort of new dramaturgical text. It could be seen as a tool that we have to make things happen in a postdramatic performance time, helping us to push the limits of the theatrical apparatus, like a key.

AH. That also means that the technical team are pulled into a role as artistic collaborator, where there are also other sensitivities required from them. For me, it is either a joy or an absolute misery to work with technicians, and actually, when I was starting out a lot of my work was informed by a desire to not talk to technicians at all.

MM. Actually, now that you speak about collaborative processes, this is an aspect that, in my opinion, is really present in your work and artistic positioning. What are the means of collaboration for you? How do you develop collaborative strategies?

AH. On the one hand, it is quite simple. I have a pretty unprofessional approach to collaboration, which is that I just want to be with the people that I admire and love the most, so I often end up collaborating with friends. Sometimes it is also a desire to collaborate with people who you don't even know what you want to collaborate on, but you can trust that something good is going to come out of it. On the other hand, there has also been a more deliberate and professional engagement with the idea of collaboration. With Tim it's more like that. We are friends, but for me, he was an enormous inspiration and kind of a hero before we became friends, so it is difficult to disengage that, and if we collaborate it's absolutely about the work. The reason for collaborating can be many, and the processes are just different every time, depending on what exactly it is the collaborator does. With Glen Neath, who wrote *ROMCOM* (2003), and I collaborated with several times after, he is a writer, so I leave the playwriting to him, and I do more of the other stuff. It is very rarely that clearcut. It starts with an appreciation of someone else's capacity, what they can do that I cannot do, and then it ends up rolling into a place where we share the sculpting of the here and now, the liveness element. For me, the greatest joy is a successful collaboration.

MM. And how do you relate to the kind of collaboration you establish with the audience? How big is that space you facilitate for them to complete your work?

AH. Actually, I'm not sure if I would describe that as a collaboration. And I'm not sure if the space I give to the audience is that big. I kind of hope it isn't. I don't really trust the audience. I want them to trust me, but I don't want to trust them. Defining a really close and constrictive set of frames within which you are going to play or attempt something or think is more interesting to me. You need to set up a contract of goodwill with the audience. That is why I think the two-person format is great. Because you are going into it with someone else you usually trust anyway and agree together to take the leap and be in a place where neither of you knows what will happen next.