The Creation of the Performative Theater *Ruang Ketubuhan*

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ABSTRACT

Site-specific performance is established in international practice, yet its application in post-disaster contexts remains under appreciated. This study addresses this gap by exploring the creation of 'Ruang Ketubuhan' (The Embodied Space), a performative theater work developed in the ruins of Mount Merapi eruption, Sleman, Yogyakarta, in 2010. Grounded in Practice-as-Research method, site-specific ethnography, and autoethnography, this study documents a creative process where ruins, objects, and borrowed narratives from survivors become active dramaturgical events. The findings demonstrate that the performer's body functioned as a medium to translate historical trauma into a shared and empathetic experience. It gained through methods of spatial attunement and emotional memory reflection. The study concludes that Ruang Ketubuhan offers a model for 'embodied site-specificity' which argued that the interweaving of body, space, and memory in performance constitutes a significant mode of knowledge production. This moves beyond aesthetic documentation to show how performative practice can actively mediate challenging history, making it accessible and relevant for both live and mediated audiences.
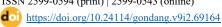
INTRODUCTION

Theater, as a form of performing art, has a long history rooted in conventional stage settings with scripts as the main reference. In practice, it often creates a clear distinction between the spaces of stage and the audience. However, the development of contemporary theater shows a tendency to dissolve these boundaries and present the performance in an actual space which is outside the stage, blurring the distance between the actors and audience. According to Dawson (2018) and Huan and Nawfal (2024), one of the developed theater productions is *performative theater* which combines theater principles with performance art to create an aesthetic experience based on the physical presence of time, space, and body (embodiment). This form of performative theater emphasizes the physical and embodied presence of the performer with a specific spatial and temporal context to create the body-in-space its primary text.

This theater production development forms a critical backdrop for *Ruang Ketubuhan* (The Embodied Space), a performative theater work developed within the ruins of Mount Merapi Eruption in Sleman, Yogyakarta. This location was selected in reference to the catastrophic 2010 eruption, which left behind the ruins of the physical evidences, as well as, memories artefacts, and the survivors' psychological effects. Merapi is not only more than a
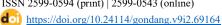
natural disaster but also a representation of cultural space rich in myth, history, and shared identity. As Wardyaningrum (2019) stated that recurring eruptions have shaped the physical landscape and the social, as well as, the spiritual narratives embedded in the community life. Living on Merapi's slopes, the mountain remains a cosmological center with enduring sacred dimensions to them, sustaining cultural practices and collective memory (Hudayana, 2021). In this context, *Ruang Ketubuhan* functions as more than an artistic expression. It becomes a medium for reactivating disaster memory, fostering dialogue among the actors' bodies, a trauma-laden space, and audience who are invited to directly experience the complex emotions engraved in Merapi. Thus, the space in this performance presents the meaning layer that transcends its physicality, functioning as a 'living space' that both records and provokes the awareness of humanity's interconnectedness with its nature and history.

The methodological approach for this work is grounded in the performer's specific artisitic creation, which covers an exploration of the body-space relationship. This creation of *Ruang Ketubuhan* (The Embodied Space) did not emerge instantly but rather as the accumulation of the performer's lifelong experience, from childhood through adulthood, marked by encounters with various performance forms, spatial practices, and theatrical ideas from influential figures. The methodological rationale came from personal artistic experience and background which focused on the body of space as the main subject of exploration. This background then developed through three (3) main experiences: 1) Community-based performance (such as the early involvement of the performer with *Calung Brewek* group in Parungkuda, Sukabumi, West Java province, where he learned early related to the actor's spatial awareness in each performance, including benefeting the power of the space itself, fostering fluid interaction with audience, and staging performances that dissolved the separation between stage and audience; 2) Formal theater training, with mentors such as Toto Sugiarto, Autar Abdillah, Teater Api Surabaya', Luhur Kayungga, and Joko Bibit Santosa. It was the experience where performances emphasized a clear divide between stage audience. The theater practice at that time confronted with multiple constraints, both material and immaterial. Yet, these limitations stimulated the performer's creativity and innovation, particularly by treating acting as the resource and primary strength of the performance; 3) Experimental work with body and site, including the encounter with Willem Christiawan who incited the spatial awareness idea, asserting that space itself could provide greater medium than the body and the way of the actor's presence which merge with that great energy, and Melati Suryodarmo who revealed the primacy of bodily presence, shaped by reflection of thought and inner consciousness, enabling performers to exist fully within a unity of space and time.

The conceptual framework of experience engaged critically with the theories of embodiment, such as Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Artaud. The idea from Grotowski et al. (1967) of the "Poor Theater" highlights that the dept of actor and audience relationships, which are communicated through the authenticity of body and voice, are what really define theater, not the luxury of the stage or artistic equipment. This viewpoint alighs with *Ruang Ketubuhan* vision, which positions the actor's body as the primary means of communication with the audience, space, and the source of production. In addition, Antonin Artaud's (1994) concept of "Theater of Cruelty" said that theater is an experience that disturbs viewers' awareness not only through written words but also through its power of body, voice, and environment. These two perspectives are complementary in *Ruang Ketubuhan* where Artaud emphasizes on the explosion of emotion and immersive spatial experience that directly affects the audience awareness, while Grotowski focuses on simplicity and body authenticity.

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This phenomenon indicates the need to examine methods of creating performative theater that place the actor's body and actual space at the center of creation. In Indonesia, explorations of performative theater have largely emphasized on aesthetic aspects or artistic discourse. Meanwhile, creative processes related to bodily and spatial interactions remain limited. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the creative process behind *Ruang Ketubuhan*, including bodily exploration, interactions with artifacts, the processing of emotional memory, and the shaping of performance texts through actor and space relations. Based on this background, the creation of *Ruang Ketubuhan* aims to; (1) analyze the process of interpreting theatrical space beyond conventional theatrical venues, (2) examine how the specific socio-cultural context of Mount Merapi renegotiate the concept of performance by shifting from prepared stage to the stage based on reality to create the space of performance occurrence, and (3) elaborate the methods through which the performer's body is stimulated to transform in dialogue with the spatial and emotional conditions of the ruins.

METHOD

This study employed Practice-as-Research (PaR) (Nelson, 2013) framework integrated with site-specific ethnography and auto ethnography. This method was selected to investigate how the creative process of *Ruang Ketubuhan* translates bodily and spatial interaction into embodied knowledge. PaR positions artistic practice as the primary mode of inquiry, whrer knowledge is generated through the creative act itself (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011; Nelson, 2013). Site-specific ethnography and autoethnography were integrated to ground the artistic practice within the socio-cultural reality of the location and to enable critical self-reflection throughout the process.

The PaR process was operationalized through a cycle structure of exploration, documentation, and reflection. The artistic practice consisted of deliberate bodily explorations conducted within the ruins of *Dukuh Terung* village, the former settlement on Mount Merapi affected by the eruption in 2010. These sessions were not reheatsals but to investigate the encounters where the performer physically engaged with volcanic ash, structural ruins, and found objects. Primary data from these explorations were generated through direct bodily experience.

The research dimension was implemented via systematic documentation using video recordings, audio notes, and a reflective hournal. Data were analyzed interatively, started from physical scores and emergent performance 'occurances' documented in the journal. They were reviewed to identify patterns of emotional and physical response. These analytical perspectives informed the next cycle of site exploration. This cycle ensured the creative process functioned as a verifiable source of knowledge, moving beyond description to generate understanding of the body capacity to archive and express spatial memory.

Next, a site-specific ethnographic approach was adopted to contextualize the artistic practice within the social and historical narratives of the place which follow the principle that site-specific work responds to a location unique layers (Pearson, 2010). Fieldwork was conducted over six-month period through multiple visits to *Dukuh Terung* for familiarization with the space.

Data were obtained primarily through semi-structured and in-depth interviews with key local informants. Most of them were a former resident of the ruined settelement. These dialogues were approached empathetically, acknowledging the informant as a co-holder of the site's memory. To ensure ethical engagement, the researcher's position was framed as a listener and translator. This ethnographic layer provided the narrative and emotional

experience that the performer's body engaged with and ensuring the work was rooted in lived experience.

Then, autoethnography was implemented to systemactically integrate the performer's subjective experience as crucial analytical data (Ellis et al., 2010). The primary tool was the reflective journal which elaborated in detail the researcher-performer's emotional responses, perceptual shifts, and artistic decisions during each site visit dan creative session.

Lastly, the first-person data was analyzed by consistently connecting personal reflections against enthographic notes and documentation of physical practice. This triangulation allowed the subjectivity itself to become a key site of analysis, enabling a transparent examination of how personal artistic history and bodily experience actively shaped the interpretation of the site and the development of the performance. It fulfilled the autoethnographic aim of connecting personal experience to wider cultural and methodological processes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emerge from the creative process documentation of *Ruang Ketubuhan* and were analyzed through the integration of PaR, site-specific ethnography, and autoethnography. This section presents the empirical results of the process according to the thematic categories that relates to the methodology of 'embodied site-specificity.' These categories are: 1) Embodied Spatial Reading and the Ecthics of Borrowed Memory, 2) Body-Object-Space as an Integrated Dramaturgical System, and 3) Presence, Memory, and the Co-Creative Audience. Following the presentation of these findings, a discussion examines their implications for performative theory, specifically regarding the re-contextualization of established concepts within a trauma-laden landscape.

1. Embodied Spatial Reading and the Ethics of Borrowed Memory

The initial phase of the work did not begin with a script or narrative, but with an embodied spatial reading. This practice was employed in visual observation to an actual engagement where the performer's body acts as a sensing and interpreting organ. This process is also supported by Eugenio Barba's principle (in Marouda et al., 2023) of pre-expressive level, namely the actor's bodily awareness prior to entering formal expression. The ruins of a house in *Dukuh Terung*, the site, was approached not as an empty stage but as a solid archive. Its texts were not written but materials, for instance, the texture of volcanic sand, the crumbling of a single standing wall, the twisted remnants of household items, and flourished regrowth of vegetation through the foundations. The performer's physical interaction with the elements, for example, walking barefoot, touching the surfaces, listening to the wind through the ruins, was generated the primary data of the research. This method resonate with Pearson's concept (2010) of site-specificity and Connerton (1989), which demands that work originates from a dialogue with the particularities of a location.

However, a critical finding was the performer's own experiential limitation. While the body could read physical textures, the profound emotional and historical layers of personal loss and trauma embedded in this site were not directly accessible through sensory engagement alone. This gap required an ethnographic strategy of borrowed memory. Through a seires of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, Ramon Temon, the former owner of the ruined house, shared his recollections, emotions, and narratives of life before and after the eruption. His description of a kitchen corner, the memory of a family gathering, or the feeling of safety once associated with the contemporary experience during the work taken and transformed from interview results into peformative potentialities.

This borrowing was not an act of appropriation but an ethical process of translation. The performer's role was framed as that of a listener and a mediator. The empirical finding here is the development of an actual translation technique. For instance, the informant's memory of the sound of rain on his tin roof was not re-awaken, instead, the performer focused on the tactile sensation of cold droplets on skin by sitting in the ruins during a drizzle. This was to consciously linking the current physical experience to the borrowed auditory memory. It created an embodied text where personal sensation and communal memory united. As Taylor (2003) suggested that the body becomes a repertoire, but this finding shows that the repertoire can be ethically populated through dialogic exchange in positioning the performer's body as a medium for communal memory rather than solely personal expression. The result was an embodied understanding of space that was simultaneously

intimate (felt through the performer's sensorium) and collective (informed by the survivor's narrative).

2. Body-Object-Space as an Integrated Dramaturgical System

The main finding of the creative process is that the performance's dramaturgy did not follow a linear narrative but emerged from the dynamic interplay between three main aspects: the body, the found objects, and the space itself. These were not separate elements (actor, prop, setting), yet the integral parts of a single performative system (Turner & Behrndt, 2016). This system was activated through a series of specific spatial encounters within the ruins, each demonstrating a different facet of this integrated system and the horizontal dramaturgy it produces.

Perfomance as Embodies Site-Specificity: Analysis of Four Location Performance

The work was performed in four distinct locations within the ruins of a single house. These locations were selected after the spatial reading from each location which presented a unique text that demanded a specific bodily response.

Location 1: The Volcanic Sand in the House Yard

Figure 1. Body burial in volcanic eruption sand (Doc. Utama, 2014)

This location was the point of entry, a flat expanse of fine volcanic ash where the houseyard once was. Here, the performer's action was one of literal immersion: Burrying his body up to the neck in the ash. This was not a symbolic gesture but a concrete, physical

dialogue with the material. The sensory data became the primary text. It linked the performer's present bodily state to the borrowed memories of the pyroclastic flow heat and the imagined remnants within the soil. The interaction demonstratated Body-Object synergy at its most fundamental: The body sensation was defined by the object (the sand), and the object's meaning (as evidence of disaster) was activated by the body's vulnerable position within it. It aligns with Artaud's vision (1994) of a sensory theater, as well as Turner & Behrndt's concept (2016), yet the finding in this work specifies that the 'cruelty' or shock is generated by the authentic materiality of the trauma site itself. The object of history directly affected the performer and audience's consciousness, bypassing symbolic representation for direct material confrontation.

Location 2: The tree in Front of the House

Moving from immersion to connection, the second location centered on a thriving tree growing amidst the ruins. This object, which was the tree, was approached not as a prop but as a living witness. The performer's interaction shifted to tactile exploration, feeling the bark and the imagined spread of roots beneath the ash. This encounter generated a complex emotional text. The tree's vitality symbolized hope and nature's resilience, a stark contrast to the human absence. The bodily response here was one of yearning and connection, a longing to touch life amidst ruins. This location highlighted how an object's inherent properties (growth, life) could provoke a specific emotional memory, both the informant's longing for his lost home and a universal reflection on life continuing after catastrophe. The dramaturgy emerged from the contrast between the body's temporal, mortal presence and the tree's persistent, non-human life.

Figure 2. Body, sand, and tree (Doc. Utama, 2014)

Location 3: The Interior Space and the Ritual of Incense

Figure 3. Incense, the spiritual voyage (Doc. Utama, 2014)

Transitioning into the skeletal remains of the house interior marked a shift from the natural to the ritual. This bounded space, defined by fragments of walls, focused the performance on evocation and communication. The object employed here was incense, chosen for its cultural resonance as a medium for memory and spirit. The act of lighting it was a deliberate invocation, a sensory tool to alter the space's atmosphere and the performer's/internal state. The fragrance served as a bridge, aiming to revive the 'lost texts' of domestic life. The performer's bodily movement here became cautious, navigating broken floors and sharp grass, his presence turning introspective. This location illustrated Body-Space interaction shaped by ritual. The architectural remnants (the space) dictated a confined, intimate mode of movement, while the incense (the object) attempted to make the intangible (memory, spirit) palpable. The performer's body became a conduit, feeling the 'urgency to enter' a home that no longer existed, embodying the tension between past habit and present ruin.

Location 4: The Structural Ruins of the House

The final location was the most structurally defined: the remaining walls and charred timber of the house itself. The objects, such as burnt wood fragments, damp masonry, carried the most direct historical weight. The bodily response escalated to enacted memory. Striking the charred wood against the ground, breaking it, and carrying the fragments in slow, unsteady steps were not acts of destruction but of embodied release and lament. This was the culmination of the somatic translation process. The informant's memories of family life within these walls and the trauma of their incineration were physically metabolized into gestures of force, fragmentation, and burden. This location most clearly revealed the horizontal dramaturgy in action: the space (the ruins) provided the objects (charred wood); the objects dictated a certain type of physical action (forceful, destructive); and the body's execution of that action, infused with borrowed emotional memory, generated the performance's climactic meaning, the embodied sorrow of irreversible loss.

Figure 4. The house affected by Merapi eruption (Doc. Utama, 2014)

The performance through four sites demonstrates that the integrated dramaturgical system was not abstract, rather it was concretely discovered through the succesfull of the site-responsive encounters. Each location tell a different question to the body, as well as each object in the location provided a different answer, to contribute to the performance's non-linear narrative.

3. Presence, Memory, and the Co-Creative Audience

The findings critically engage with the concept of presence which move it from an abstract quality of the actor to a situated and relational practice. In *Ruang Ketubuhan*, presence was defined as the performer's capacity to be fully located at the intersection of internal emotional memory (personal and borrowed) and external spatial text. Data from video analysis and journaling show that this presence manifested as a specific quality of attention, where a listening readiness to both the internal flow of memory-images and the external stimuli of the site (a cracking branch, shift in wind). This part supports the pursuit of authenticity by Grotowski (2002) which grounds it in a dialectic between inner memory and outer environment, as well as Eugenio Barba's principle (Marouda et al., 2023) of pre-expressive level.

Furthermore, the research reveals that this cultivated presence directly structured the audience's role and experience. The performance was not staged in a frontal configuration, yet the audience was invited to move through the ruins, following the performer or encountering him in static tableaux. This performance choice transformed the audience from passive witnesses to mobile audience explorers of the space. The audience's journey mirrored the performer's own embodied reading. The audience's physical experience thus became a parralel text to the performer's actions (Turner & Behrndt, 2016).

While formal audience response data falls outside the scope of this study, the methodological design itself places the audience as an integral component. The performer's awareness of being observed by a moving, exploring group influenced the rhythm and focus of his actions, a dynamic noted in performative analysis (Nacache, 2012; Vakulenko, 2021). A silent and attentive audience member standing near a specific ruined wall could draw the performer's energy to that location, making the audience an unwitting dramaturgical collaborator (Carlson, 2004). This finding complicates the performer-audience relationship described by classical theorists. It is not a fixed channel (Grotowski's actor-to-spectator transmission) but a triangular relationship (performer-site-audience), where the site mediates

and influences the connection between the other two agents (Turner & Behrndt, 2016). The audience completes the circuit of meaning by bringing their own bodily experience and interpretations to the space the performer has activated.

Discussion: Re-contextualizing Theory in the Landscape of Trauma

The findings detailed elaborated previously can be examined not merely apply theory but also how the specific context of Mount Merapi pressures and redefines it. The analysis centers on two key theoretical confrontations, which are from 'Poor Theatre' to 'Trauma-Informed Paucity' using Grotowski's perspectives (1967), and from 'Theatre of Cruelty' to 'Empathic Materiality'of Artaud' s (1994) concept.

Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' is an aesthetic and philosophical choice to strip away superfluous spectacle to reveal the essential actor-audience encounter (Grotowski et al., 1967). In Merapi ruins, however, 'poorness' is not a choice but a material and historical given. The devastation is real, not simulated. Therefore, the performer's task was not to create poverty but to respond ethically to its existing presence. This shifts the focus from the actor's technical sacrifice to a relational ethics. The authenticity sought was not just internal honesty but fidelity to the site's truth, ruination, silence, and residual pain. The performance's power derived from this fidelity, suggesting that in post-disaster sites, embodiment must be first and foremost an ethical practice of acknowledgement before it can be an aesthetic practice of expression.

Next, Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' aims to shock the spectator out of passivity through sensory assault (Artaud, 1994). In a trauma context, a direct, unmediated assault could easily veer into exploitation or re-traumatization. The findings show that the sensory power of Ruang Ketubuhan came not from staged violence, but from the raw, unadorned materiality of the site itself, such as the touch of ash, and the sight of charred wood. The 'cruelty' was inherent, not imposed (Turner & Behrndt, 2016). The performer's role was to frame these materials with a presence that was vulnerable and reflective, creating a container for shared emotion rather than a delivery system for shock. This transforms Artaud's concept from one of aggression to one of shared, empathetic confrontation with difficult reality. The audience is not attacked but invited to feel alongside the performer, with the site itself as the primary agent of affective intensity.

To sum up, the results demonstrate that the creative process of Ruang Ketubuhan generated a distinct methodology of 'embodied site-specificity.' This methodology is characterized by the somatic translation of borrowed memory stated by Taylor (2003), the cultivation of a horizontal dramaturgy among body, object, and space, and the structuring of a triadic, mobile relationship with an audience. The discussion argues that this practice forces a critical re-evaluation of canonical performance theories. In the post-disaster landscape of Merapi, concepts like poverty (Grotowski, 1967) and cruelty (Artaud, 1994) are divested of their purely aesthetic connotations and re-anchored in material history and ethical responsibility. The performance, therefore, stands not as an illustration of theory, but as a case study in how specific places demand the adaptation, and sometimes the subversion, of the theoretical frameworks we bring to them.

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CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that the creation of *Ruang Ketubuhan* within the ruins of Mount Merapi which provides a significant methodological and theoretical contribution to performance research. By rigorously applying an integrated Practice-as-Research framework, it moves beyond artistic documentation to offer a replicable model of embodied site-specificity. This model provides a concrete methodology for performative theatre, detailing processes of somatic spatial reading and the ethical translation of borrowed community memory into bodily expression. It thereby addresses a gap in performance studies by showing how the body can function as an archival medium and a site of dialogue between personal sensation and collective history.

The research makes three (3) primary contributions. First, Practice-as-Research (PaR) is transparently operationalized the cycle of creative exploration, documentation, and reflexive analysis, validating artistic practice as a robust mode of knowledge production. Second, it enriches site-specific and performative theatre discourse by proposing a horizontal dramaturgy emerging from the interplay of body, object, and space, rather than from a predetermined narrative. Third, it establishes a vital precedent for ethically-grounded, post-disaster art in Indonesia. By framing the performer as a listener and translator, employing an ethic of "borrowed memory", the study argues that engagement with trauma landscapes must prioritize relational responsibility and cultural sensitivity over aesthetic imposition.

Ultimately, the Merapi context does not merely illustrate theories from Grotowski or Artaud but actively redefines them. Here, 'poorness' becomes a material condition demanding ethical response, and 'cruelty' is inherent in the site's raw materiality, necessitating shared empathetic confrontation rather than staged assault. Thus, this article positions Ruang Ketubuhan as a case study in how local specificity must pressure and adapt global performance theory, offering a vital pathway for empathetic, embodied historiography in spaces of trauma.

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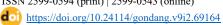
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