

## **Magnifying The Miniature:**

An Enquiry into the effects of the miniature and its implications towards performance.

Shanna May Breen

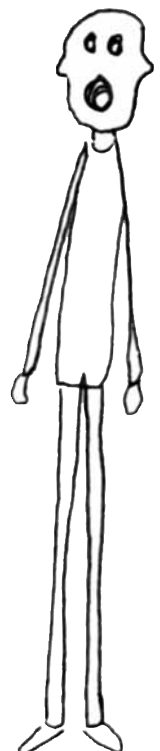
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## **DECLARATION**

I confirm that, except where other sources are acknowledged, this project is my own unaided work, and that its complete word count including bibliography is 9540 words.

Signed: .....

Date: .....



## **Thank You**

To my research writing supervisor Dr. Mark Leahy. To my family for allowing my love of the miniature to grow. To Hotel Modern and Laura Heit for keeping in contact and sending me words of wisdom for this research writing. To the magic of Dartington that I will take with me forever. To all the artists and people that I have researched for giving me inspiration.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this research writing to Ai Weiwei whose whereabouts are unknown after the Chinese government arrested him while boarding a plane to Hong Kong in April 2011; your voice is heard.

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## Introduction

### **Magnifying the Miniature: An enquiry into the effects of the miniature and its implications towards performance.**

I myself remain overpoweringly preoccupied by distortions in scale: When I was a child, I spoke like a child, and I had a love of tiny things - like a child. When I came to be an adult I acquired still more tiny things, and I placed them in contexts that best enabled them to make the world intelligible. (Self, 2008:7)

When I think of the miniature and how I became so fascinated with it,, not only in my artistic practice but my life, I go back to my early childhood. Below is a picture of me as a baby playing in my old sitting room on Blackrock Road, Cork City. I am laid out on my new Christmas present, a play mat. If you look closely you will see a small hand puppet of a cat in front of me, it is blue with quite a large bow. Is this the moment, a Christmas morning in 1990 that I discovered my love for the tiny? For as long as I can remember I have always been fascinated with the miniature and now it has become a way in which I 'make the world intelligible.' (Self, 2008:7) After all, this making of the world comprehensible is my aim as an artist.



Fig.1. Breen, J., 1990. *No title*. Private Collection: Shanna Breen

When I heard a visiting artist say 'I have grown up with the notion' (Palmer,2011) at a lecture on site specific art, I realised that I have always grown up with the idea of miniature and developed a type of obsession with small objects. It was in my second year at University studying performance that I decided to explore 'the small' in a performative environment. From that time I have used the miniature as a tool or a way of telling.

I made a conscious decision to use this research writing to further my understanding of my own practice in the miniature and to deepen it; a practical engine to launch me into my future work on 'the small', a bridge. To explore a way in which I can present the notion of the miniature as more than just a question of scale and by doing so unlock its creative potential and discover the effects of the miniature in performance and performative environments. I propose to engage with writings from philosophers, architecture, literature, interviews and by exploring artistic practices, my own and others. In gathering my findings I am aware I could have looked at the miniature through cinematic and literary examples, but my interest and area of studies does not lie there. Instead, I am particularly interested in the charged quality of 'the small' that can be found in a live situation.

As this thesis aims to work as a reflection on, and an informing of, my own practice, I will start by examining the work of a theatre company called *Hotel Modern* who look at micro performative environments through exploring the macro themes of human disaster. I shall then attempt to answer questions, set by myself, that arose directly out of my work with *Hotel Modern* during my Contextual Enquiry Project.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of this writing I shall now attempt to present a description of what 'the small' could be in a performance or performative environment. The idea of size and scale in architectural terms are not the same thing as they represent two different sets of qualities. 'Technically size is quantitative and bound to measurement while scale is qualitative and relative - something bigger than something else.' (Morris, 2006:9) In the case of this thesis I would argue that scale and size are equal within a performance or performative environment as both size and scale represent something smaller but are constantly being compared to something bigger. Interestingly, further research of the word miniature, tells us that it is of late sixteenth-century origin and comes 'from Italian miniature, via medieval Latin from *miniare*' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2005) which means to 'illuminate' (Soanes and Stevenson,2005). Miniature is 'a thing that is smaller than normal, especially a small replica or model.' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2005





Figure 2. Helle, H., 2009. *A Scene from Kamp*.  
Private collection: *Hotel Modern*.

## Part One

### A Discovery of the Miniature: A study of Hotel Modern

This apple is a little universe in itself, the seed of which, being hotter than the other parts, gives out the conserving heat of its globe; and this seed, in my opinion, is the little sun of this little world, that warms and feeds the vegetative salt of this little mass. (Cyrano de Bergerac, cited in Bachelard 1969: 151)

Here Cyrano de Bergerac presents to the reader the notion that if you give as much imagination to an object or thing, a total inversion of observation is created. By looking at an apple with great attention you will then see the apple as a whole 'a universe in itself' and thus you break it up into components 'the seed', 'the other parts' and 'the apple'. (Cyrano de Bergerac, cited in Bachelard 1969: 151) I see my writing as 'a little universe' that can also be broken up into these sections. At this stage I would like to introduce the theatre company *Hotel Modern* - 'the seed'. (Cyrano de Bergerac, cited in Bachelard 1969: 151) *Hotel Modern* was the cause for the shift in direction towards the miniature within my artistic practice. To begin to discuss 'the small' without discussing the work of the company feels like an incomplete universe. I discovered the work of this Company in the first year of my degree. They are one of the leading theatre companies that work in the miniature and are respected worldwide. *Hotel Modern* is a three member Dutch company based in Rotterdam. They create miniature performative universes by making small scale models while exploring the macro themes of human disasters. The *Hotel Modern* website describes their work: 'They provide an opportunity to view the world, literally from a macro perspective.' (*Hotel Modern*, 2010).

After following the work of *Hotel Modern* for two years I applied to work with them as part of my final year Contextual Enquiry Project *Little Hunger: An Exploration of the Lost Stories of the Great Irish Famine*. They pointed me in new directions with many questions and discussions on the work they create and how they begin to devise through 'the small'. As part of my ongoing research of the miniature I also saw a show of theirs called *Kamp*<sup>2</sup> in Rotterdam. *Kamp* is based on Auschwitz concentration camp, one of many execution camps built during the Second World War under Hitler's orders. The camps were used to imprison members of the Jewish Community and eventually housed gas chambers in which the Nazi authorities murdered millions of prisoners. The original camp was 5000 acres and *Hotel Modern* reduced this to a scale model of 36 feet high by 33 feet wide, containing buildings representing the gas chambers, sleeping barracks, watch towers and even the casino in which the German soldiers would be entertained after a day's duty. 'An

enormous scale model of Auschwitz fills the stage. Overcrowded barracks, a railway track, with an entrance and gateway.' (Herschhal, 2010)

Constructed from cardboard and wire, the model of Auschwitz includes barbed wire fencing, watch towers, trains, gas chambers, execution gallows and a semi constructed second execution house. The model of the camp is brought to life on stage: thousands of three inch tall handmade model human puppets represent the prisoners and their executors. The model prisoners are made from wire and clay and are dressed in white and grey striped clothing.

'The company would manipulate the bald, pale, emaciated puppets - falling out of trains, slurping the last drops of their watery soup, being worked to death, beaten to death, shoved into gas chambers and cleaning out gas chambers.' (Herschhal, 2010)

The model contains and tells the daily life of the thousands of figures from sunrise to sunset. Men hang from ropes while building the roof of an execution centre, the train pulls in and hundreds of figures march off and then are stripped of their belongings, men are being shot against a wall, while a younger prisoner cleans up the blood without looking at the bodies. There is no dialogue in the piece, just sound effects - of steel doors clanking, gravel being stepped on and drunken SS guards singing war songs in the camp's casino.

I documented some of my responses and considerations on the performance *Kamp* to allow the show to link and inform my practice. I wrote this text the following day after seeing the performance and uploaded it to my project blog *Inisbeag Blog* (Breen, 2010). 'It was the quantity of what I saw that was so thrilling to me. The fact I was observing the lives of thousands and seeing each of their imprisoned, everyday lives. A whole world within a room, being shown in a new light.' At the time I was not aware that this piece of text would be the catalyst for my next project, my thesis.

It was while watching *Kamp* I realised that working in the miniature was not just an aesthetic decision, but a way of telling that was unique to 'the small'. It was from this point and for the purposes of this research that I wanted to discover what these qualities were and so composed a set of questions I wished to explore through this thesis: Does the miniature create portals?, How does the miniature allow you to show the stories of a large number of people, quantity? And How does using the miniature make the familiar unfamiliar?

Leading on directly from this study of *Hotel Modern*, in the next chapter I shall consider the concept of the miniature and portals.



Figure 3. Breen, S., 2010. *Little Hunger Box*. Private collection: Shanna Breen



## Chapter One

### Does The Miniature Create Portals?

"What a curious feeling!" said Alice "I must be shutting up like a telescope". And so indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through the little door into the lovely garden. (Carroll, 1999: 11)

One of the questions generated from my work with *Hotel Modern* was, does the miniature create portals? This question concerns the idea of a world within a world, or worlds within a room that you can find within the work of 'the small'. I wondered what it would be like to play in a tiny world that exists only under the closest focus, to climb into a rabbit hole and enter another world or dimension through the miniature and then to relate my findings to performance. *Hotel Modern* builds and uses scale models in their work to devise through and from; they build them specifically. In architectural terms:

Assumptions regarding any model are fairly straightforward: for example, (1) Models represent buildings; (2) models are at a smaller scale than the buildings they represent; and (3) models make it easy to comprehend the architectural idea. (Morris, 2006:8)

I was taken through *Kamp* to the complete world of Auschwitz. By reducing the camp to model size the audience was able to enter a whole universe. In a room, I was transported to the world of Auschwitz through original stories, architecture, mood and aesthetics of the original camp. I understood it. It told me the whole visual story as I stood looking down at the site. As the first models stepped through the gate with *Arbeit Macht Frei*<sup>3</sup> written overhead, I also stepped through into the Auschwitz dimension.

The exactness of the replica, the detail, the specificity of design, and the smallness was a very effective tool in acting as a portal to the hellish world of the Jewish prisoners. *Hotel Modern* had used this specifically designed model, based on the original blueprints of Auschwitz, as a way to create and show this particular work. By doing so, the step I took into Auschwitz was a huge one. Is this always the case in the miniature acting as a portal? Does the performative environment have to be created with the performance as an end result? Would a non-specifically designed model create performance possibilities and opportunities? In order to try and understand further the portal within the miniature and its performance implications my research led me to the *Queen Mary's Dolls' House* exhibited in Windsor Castle. (Lutyens, 2011)



*Queen Mary's Dolls' House* is not a dolls' house in the usual sense of the word - that is, a children's toy. It is instead a glorified and fully furnished architectural model, created by the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, and intended to be a historical record of the ideal early twentieth-century English house... it was a product of the period just after the First World War when, in the reaction to the horrors of the recent past, people wished to escape into a brighter, more frivolous world and enjoy themselves. (Robinson, 2002:5)

The house is made up of three floors, the rooms include, a lobby, day nursery, kitchen, entrance hall, garden, lift, linen room, wine cellar and so on. The library consists of 300 books all specially bound, written and published by several different firms. The nursery of the dollhouse is home to a dollhouse; within which if you look very closely is its own dollhouse. A world within a world within a world. The detail is so exact the linen room contained enough linen to cater for the household for a year and was stored in 'six large panelled oak cupboards'. (Robinson, 2002:58)



Figure 4. Crisp, D., anon. *The Assembly of Queen Mary's Dolls' House*.  
Hayward Gallery: National Trust Photographic Library.

The dollhouse is described as a 'historical record' (Robinson, 2002:5) of an early twentieth-century English house. The fact that the miniaturized object can be a record suggests to me that it can transport the observer back in time, to another world, it is a way in, an entrance. The house was constructed after World War One and allowed the post war generation to 'escape'. (Robinson, 2002:5) This notion of 'escape' through the miniature is also found in this writing by Herman Hesse:

A prisoner paints a landscape on the wall of his cell showing a miniature train entering a tunnel. When his jailers come to get him, he asks them 'politely to wait a moment, to allow me to verify something in the little train in my picture. As usual, they started to laugh, because they considered me to be weak-minded. I made myself very tiny, entered into my picture and climbed into the little train, which started moving, then disappeared

into the darkness of the tunnel. For a few seconds longer, a bit of flaky smoke could be seen coming out of the round hole. Then the smoke blew away, and with it my picture, and with the picture, my person...' (Hermann Hesse<sup>4</sup>, cited in Bachelard 1969:150)

I have now considered that the miniature through representation can in fact transport the observer into another century or dimension. 'If we take the imprisoned painter's little train, geometrical contradiction is redeemed, and the representation is dominated by imagination [...] One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small.' (Bachelard, 1969:150)

Both model types, *Kamp* - the performance based environment and *Queen Mary's Dolls' House* - the historical record, go beyond logic and allow us to experience '...what is large in what is small.' (Bachelard, 1969:150) These replicas or representations take us illogically into other dimensions and larger worlds. They act as portals simply because they are small. Following on from this argument that both types of scale models, because they are replicas and representations, allow us to enter other realms, do all miniature portals have to be replicas?

Laura Heit, an animator and co-director of experimental animation at California Institute of Arts, tours the world with *The Matchbox Shows*. Through matchboxes Laura Heit creates miniature performative environments in which tiny stories unfold. For example, in her show *Look For Me* (Heit, 2008) Heit presents a forest within the matchbox with trees made out of green paper and matchsticks. She lights the matches and says "The forest is on fire!" after the little flames go out she unrolls a tiny drawing that depicts animals running out of the forest fire. 'Firstly, there were squirrels [...] and then a bear, and then mummy bear... and then there was you'. (Heit, 2008) Not only does she create the forest fire story but she includes 'you' as a part of the tiny performance itself. Alongside the animal characters she pulls from the matchbox forest there is also a little you represented. Her work has been described as 'parallel universes' (Heit, in interview with Susan Simpson, 2007) and in *Look For Me* not only does the matchbox act as a portal into the forest world but the creator herself has acknowledged the audience's presence in this world and she has placed 'you' on the other side of the gateway. She says 'You can re-enact the show whenever you want in the palm of your hand.' (Heit, in interview with Susan Simpson, 2007) *Kamp* and *Queen Mary's Dolls' House* are exact replications of their worlds and act as portals. In contrast, Laura Heit's work uses tiny objects – the matchbox and matches as representations of a forest and trees, in which to contain her stories. All act as portals to other worlds.





Figure 5. Heit, L., anon. *The Matchbox Shows*. Private Collection: Laura Hiet.

I recall a devising session I had in 2009 which involved my theatre company *Fold Out Theatre*. We began to devise from a company member, Kalila Storey's set of instructions, 'she/he begins to fly' 'they begin to fly'. For the first hour we waved our hands in the air, made wind noises and jumped off chairs. I remember walking home for a lunch break and thinking how could we enter the world of flight, surely flying is possible within devising for a performance? I came back to the studio with a small toy hedgehog family I have had since childhood and marked out a smaller room/perimeter on the studio floor. I suggested to the company that we could now use the same instructions but that each one of us would be one of the smaller hedgehogs - after a minute I had begun to fly within the room. The hedgehog became an extension of my arm and as such was able to inhabit, manoeuvre and fly through the air. Together we were able to take off and land. He was a tiny flying machine manipulated by me, a larger flying machine, and together we had entered into another world; the world of flight. This was the moment I realised the possibility of dimensions within the miniature but I feel that I am only now beginning to fully grasp what happened that day. We had entered the train and disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel!

I interviewed Laura Heit as part of my research into works in the miniature. She suggested that I could create some of my own matchbox worlds. (L. Heit, 2011, pers. comm. 14 February) I was interested to see what other people would think of the work of the small and the idea of creating matchbox worlds. In order to investigate this I set up an installation/experiment which I will explore in the next section of this thesis.

## Part Two

### A Case Study

**Title:** *Matchbox Worlds?* <sup>5</sup>

**Aim:** I was interested to see what an audience would think of the work of the small and the idea of creating small matchbox universes. During this research writing I have found it somewhat challenging to generate a response to the idea of the portal that can be created within 'the small'. Hence my reasoning for creating the experiment in the first place: to generate a reaction that I could document and analyse.

**Method:** I decided to create an installation called *Matchbox Worlds?* It was part of an art exhibition in Falmouth, Cornwall, called *A Night at the Poly*. The event involved the showcasing of many local artists whose practices included film, music, live art, installations and walkabout performances for the event.

The setting up of *Matchbox Worlds?* consisted of placing twenty empty white matchboxes in a row on a large white window ledge within the gallery. The boxes were numbered from 1-20 with black pen and a number of materials were placed in a line behind the boxes on the ledge. I chose to have only twenty boxes as I was not sure how many watchers or participants to expect. Twenty felt like an even number and I thought it would allow the maker to feel like their box was important and not just part of a survey.

The materials I had left at the disposal of the participants included glue, sellotape, coloured paper, elastic bands, plastic plants, wire, and thread. I had also left a disposable camera labelled 'Take a picture of your world'. This would allow the participants to document the process of each box and see the different stages of the experiment. On the wall next to the matchboxes was a page with an artist statement with my previous practice of the miniature described. It also had a set of instructions:

#### Instructions

Please create a world in a matchbox. Use any of the materials you see, and take as long or as little time as you need to make your miniature world. You make the rules and you are the creator.

After you are finished with your matchbox you are welcome to fill out some questions and comments and post them. Note your responses may be used within my research writing, an enquiry into the effects of the miniature. All the correct referencing will be made.

**Result:** The experiment lasted for three hours. At the start people came and read the notices I had put beside the window ledge and looked curiously at the materials and boxes. After twenty minutes people began to use the materials to create the little worlds. At most, two to three people would work on the boxes at a time. Sometimes only one person would be left alone making their box. The row of boxes and materials became messy and the order was lost, the chaos of the window ledge contrasted starkly with the absolute concentration and attention that was being given to the making of the boxes.

As I walked around the work of the other exhibitors I saw one person sitting in the corner, on a step alone, carving little figures out of chalk sticks. Later as I went back to the boxes I saw that the chalk figures were placed in box 11 and the lid was closed. Walking past I heard one man become frustrated and say "*Why is there no glue?!"*" The exhibition was creating a response to 'the small' and generating a sort of live negotiation between the crafter and the focused attention they had to give to the box because of the smallness of the container and what it contained.

**Response:** The responses from the participants was varied and considered. They seemed to mention the idea of entering a world 'coming into, going out of' or to 'fold – unfold'. Laura Heit created worlds and placed us in them. These participants by the very fact that they made the worlds allowed themselves to enter into them through the idea of attention. The following feedback can be found in Appendix A with the full response sheets.

The maker of box 13 wrote:

'Detail, precision, surprise, secret, overspill, going into, coming out of.'

The maker of box 3 wrote:

'more attention paid to detail'

The maker of box 20 wrote:

'Attention to detail, yet wider perspective!'

(Anon, 2011)

After considering this installation/experiment and the responses that it evoked, I will in the next chapter explore the idea of attention and the miniature.



Figure 6. Gustavsson, C., 2011. *No Title*. Private collection: Shanna Breen.

## Chapter Two

### Attention and the Miniature

The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnified world in itself. Almost an 'unrecognisable' world. (Henry Miller, cited in Bogart 2007:51)

At the start of this thesis I had wondered what the idea of multiplicity was within the work of the miniature and had set up the question: How does the miniature allow you to show the stories of a large number of people? However, as a direct result of the installation experiment, *Matchbox Worlds?* and the responses it generated I came to the conclusion that the notion of attention in the miniature was what needed my 'close attention' (Henry Miller, cited in Bogart 2007:51). I was drawn to the amount and type of focus that the makers and the viewers of *Matchbox Worlds?* were giving to the miniature worlds, simply because of the worlds' physicality – their smallness. In this chapter I will explore how the miniature creates this focus and what can this do to the maker and performer, the watcher and the audience?

Attention is a powerful tool. It can be used and misused, consciously or unconsciously. The quality and depth of one's attention is ultimately what counts most in every situation. Attention is, after all, one of the few aspects of life that one can control. The only gift we can give to a situation is the force of our attention. We can control attention and we can control the quality of our attention. When attention is compromised, the outcome is weaker. (Bogart, 2007:52)

This notion of focused attention from the maker that is described by Anne Bogart<sup>6</sup>, was apparent when I went to see The Unlievers Series: *Sunflower Seeds* by Ai Weiwei (Weiwei, 2011) installation in the Tate Modern, London, as part of my research for this writing.



Figure 7. Breen, S., 2011. *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*. Private collection.

*The Unilever Series: Sunflower Seeds* is made up of millions of small works, each apparently identical, but actually unique. However realistic they may seem, these life-sized sunflower seed husks are in fact intricately hand crafted in porcelain. Each seed has been individually sculpted and painted by specialists working in small-scale workshops in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen. Far from being industrially produced, they are the effort of hundreds of skilled hands. Poured into the Turbine Hall's vast industrial space, the 100 million seeds form a seemingly infinite landscape. (Tate Modern, 2010)

I had originally visited the exhibition as I was curious as to how the tiny seeds, each one representing a Chinese person, would work in such a huge space. A world of a hundred million tiny objects in one room. What I had not expected was the level of attention and detail in the creation of each tiny seed and what this 'close attention' (Henry Miller, cited in Bogart 2007:51) meant to the installation as a whole. Because each seed had been handcrafted and individually painted, 'each apparently identical, but actually unique' (Tate Modern, 2010) the work resonated with me. Because every detail in each seed was shaped by hands, not in factories, the attention from Ai Weiwei and his workers was apparent and the piece became 'mysterious' and 'awesome' 'almost an unrecognisable world' (Henry Miller, cited in Bogart 2007:51) I uploaded a question to Ai Weiwei after viewing the piece in a feedback booth set up to allow the audience to upload videos in response to what they saw: 'What would happen if you only had one seed, instead of millions?' (Breen, 2011)

Although my question has not yet been answered, or may never be answered, I can only speculate how Ai Weiwei might have responded and try to answer the question myself through the idea of attention. I am sure my connection would not have been as complete or as extraordinary with *Sunflower Seeds* if Ai Weiwei had chosen to make one huge sunflower. This absolute focus from the makers of the small, simply because the size demands this quality of attention, created a type of compression that can feed into performance. In the same way *Hotel Modern's* worlds of scale models and thousands of model figures, each with a different face, had been crafted and shaped by the same type of attention. The force of this attention had also been apparent in their performance *Kamp*.

David and Kirsten McGuire create this same type of concentrated attention in the making of their show *The Icebook* (McGuire, 2010).<sup>7</sup> *The Icebook* was intended, and made, as a miniature demonstration model that could be shown to producers and other investors in order to seek funding for a full scale show. However, *The Icebook* has now turned into a



fully fledged miniature show of its own. It is a pop-up book that 'comes to life in front of the audience's eyes as if by magic.' (McGuire, 2011) The book folds out into a backdrop in which a story of 'a princess who lures a boy into the forest in order to warm her heart of ice' (McGuire, 2011) is projected from behind the pages of the book. '*The Icebook* is an intimate and immersive experience of film, music, theatre, dance, mime, book art and animation designed for an audience of eight people lasting twenty minutes' (McGuire, 2011)

The idea for *The Icebook* started when Kirstin McGuire held a handcrafted small pop up construction in front of a light to reveal 'the utterly beautiful effect of the light coming through the paper, creating shadows and silhouettes which we could then enhance and complement with back projected film footage.' (McGuire, 2011) The projecting from the back of the paper creates the illusion of the 3D perspective.

It is the detailed focus given to the engineering of this miniature work that interested me. The book itself 'needed massive thought'. (McGuire, 2011) Each page is held up by strong magnets and needed to be 'bound in a very specific way to allow for the projections to shine through' (McGuire, 2011). All the detailed paper cuttings and design drawings to create the pop up images of a forest, a chapel, a castle, a house and a boat were completed by hand. The film footage was then projected behind the images allowing the detailed cut outs to come to life. Simply because of its small size the process behind the making of each page of *The Icebook* was lengthy and required much pin pointed attention on behalf of its creators. They had to give a particular type of attention and focus because of its smallness.

To further this idea of the type and quality of attention required when crafting the miniature I decided to return to *Queen Mary's Dolls' House* and explore. Imagine if we took the dining table in Queen Mary's castle and set the table according to the household rules of the period, then we reduced this original sized table setting to a miniature and placed it in the world of *Queen Mary's Dolls' House*? The level of detail, precision and focus by the maker would be intense. In *Dinner is Served*, a professional butler named Arthur Inch interestingly refers to preparing for a successful dinner party as 'planning and performance' (Hirst and Inch, 2003:33). The following is a small section on the level of detail involved in the task of setting the table:

The rule for setting out the cutlery is to place the first-course utensils on the outside of the setting and then work your way inward for each subsequent course. So there might be a soup spoon on the extreme right, then a large table fork on the extreme left, which was used for the fish course. Next would come a table knife and fork for the meat course, followed by a spoon and fork for the pudding. (Hirst and Inch, 2003:33)



Figure 8. Crisp, D., anon. *The Dining Room: Queen Mary's Dolls' House*. Hayward Gallery: National Trust Photographic Library.

The rules for the table setting continue on and on. Imagine again the setting of the table in Queen Mary's Castle and then setting the one in her small doll's house, or to go even further, to what it would be like to set the table within the dolls house of the dolls house situated in the nursery, a world within, within, within... The compression of attention would be gigantic. 'Miniature runs together a density of information, proof of craft and an invitation to the subject.' (Morris, 2006:11)

Following on from this notion of focused attention and the making of 'the small' I wondered what implications this compression and reduction of size might have for the performer in a miniature performance?

During my Contextual Enquiry Project I observed Pauline Kalker, one of the founding members of *Hotel Modern*, in a devising session. I realised in that session that in order to create the illusion of the 'small scale' being life size, the tiny movements of the models would need concentration and practice; a very focused discipline. I wrote the following text after that session with Pauline Kalker:

The model must be an extension of you. You must understand how the model moves through your movements. The smallest of gesture in your body will translate into a large movement in the models. You need to constantly control your body's movement in order to allow the model to move the way somebody that size would naturally move. This technique takes a lot of focus. (Breen, 2010)

In making of *The Icebook* the McGuires firstly created footage of themselves and then they projected this footage on to the small paper pop up book. They created these real life sized clips of themselves doing the actions and movements against green material. Then



in order to get these projections to miniature scale they, as makers and performers, would have to start 'imagining themselves as tiny little people in a miniature world made out of paper.' (McGuire, 2011) This suggests that as they reduced themselves in their imaginations they had to give particular attention to their physical nature and their movements would have to have a different quality. Smaller more delicate actions would be needed. Any large or normal size gestures would impose on the scale of their surroundings and quite literally disturb the world they had created.

Both *Hotel Modern* and Laura Heit use projection as a device to enlarge their small worlds for an audience. Due to this enlarging of the small on to large screens the performer has to be absolutely conscious that every tiny gesture will be read in huge scale by an audience. They have to create a physicality for the miniature that will be magnified. The consideration they have to direct to their own performance has to be one of complete attention.

I will now consider if this type of mental focus and complete concentration required by the makers and performers of the miniature has any implications for their audiences.

The miniature also creates a type of two way magnifying glass for the makers and the watchers. 'To use a magnifying glass is to pay attention, but isn't paying attention already having a magnifying glass? (Bachelard, 1969:158) The very smallness of the miniature in a performance insists that an audience has to really focus its attention in order to be able to really see.

Sigmund Freud distinguishes two types of attention: focus attention and hovering or free-floating attention. In focused attention you tune out the surroundings and concentrate on one thing at a time. The free-floating attention attains a distance but also requires presence. A free-floating attention is what you use when you drive a car. (Sigmund Freud cited in Bogart, 2006:54)

The miniature by its very nature helps you as the watcher to 'tune out' (Sigmund Freud cited in Bogart, 2006:54) and concentrate on the singular. By working in the miniature you create circumstances that only allow for sharp focus.

Interestingly, Laura Heit and *Hotel Modern* project their performances onto large screens in order to facilitate a greater number of people viewing their work. *The Icebook* makers do not project their small show but have chosen to play it to a more intimate audience of eight people. In an interview Laura Heit was asked: 'What do you think is the effect for the audience in seeing the show very small and very large at the same time?' She replied;

I think the video projection of the tiny puppet show adds legitimacy to it. It commands a certain amount of attention. In the beginning, it was a simple solution to allow an audience to see the shows, but now I think it's a very important part. It allows me to enter the stage and interact with myself. It feels more like 'an act', like a magic show. There is also something very intriguing about seeing something so small so big: It's a bit like being let in on a secret. (Heit, in interview with Susan Simpson, 2007:18)

Martin Heidegger suggested that every event is shaped by the presence of the observer. Intense watchfulness is what generates a pressurized environment, the cauldron, in which chemistry occurs. As quantum physicists like to say, reality happens when you look at it. And how your reality happens depends on how you look at it.

The quality of this attention, how they look, by the maker and the watcher of the small is as Anne Bogart said; 'Attention is a powerful tool'. (Bogart, 2006:52)

Now that I have investigated the relationship between the miniature and the types and qualities of attention generated by 'the small', and its implications for the makers and the watchers for performance, I will in the final chapter present my research on the last question of the unfamiliar in the familiar that can be found in the work of the miniature.





Figure 9. Breen, S., 2010. *Little Hunger Box*. Private collection: Shanna Breen



### Chapter Three

#### The Uncanny and the Small

How does using the miniature make the familiar unfamiliar?

In order to understand the full implications for the miniature in performance one must first understand the concept of the uncanny. This psychoanalytical theory is a concept developed by Sigmund Freud, in which he discusses the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the same moment and how the two are closely related:

'...we can investigate the semantic content that has accrued to the German word Unheimlich [of which the nearest semantic equivalents in English are 'uncanny' and 'eerie', but which etymologically corresponds to 'unhomely']...' (Freud, 2003: 124)

This concept of the unfamiliar also has its place in literature known as Defamiliarisation. In her thesis, *Little People, Little Worlds; The Strange and Wonderful in Miniature Narrative* Victoria Armstrong states:

The Russian Formalists theorised that recognition debilitates fresh perception, and that rhythm and regularity of life renders humans incapable of truly seeing anything; Victor Shklovsky wrote that "(Art) exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony". Defamiliarisation, then, is the technique of "disrupting the modes of ordinary linguistic discourse" whereby "literature makes strange the world of ordinary perception and renews the reader's lost capacity for fresh sensation." (Armstrong, 2006:5)

While touring around Ireland in 2010 with my miniature performance *Little Hunger* which took place in a specially constructed small box, I noticed the audience would bend down with a smile, until they began to realise that they were watching morbid stories from the Great Irish Famine. They would stand back up saying something along the lines of "Oh, I see!" The audience needed to break away and watch from a height. To distance themselves.

Why?

Is it because the audience expectations had been challenged? When they saw the small box and the small figures they had associated the size of these objects with childhood and play. When they realised that the content of the stories was the opposite of their expectations they stood back and watched differently. The smallness of the world I had created and the hugeness of the content stopped them in their tracks.

'He recalls the little cardboard houses that children play with. In other words, the tiny

things we imagine simply take us back to childhood, to familiarity with toys, the reality of toys.' (Bachelard, 1969:149)

In *Little People in the City*, a photographic record of Slinkachu's street art, he juxtaposes diminutive figures in the great and troubling city. '...tiny figures dabbling in great puddles, nearly submerged in gargantuan bird droppings, terminating bees bigger than themselves...' (Self, 2008:6).

When Slinkachu<sup>8</sup> was setting up one of his miniature worlds he had the following encounter:

Policeman: Excuse me sir. Would you mind telling me what you are doing?  
Slinkachu: Oh. Er... I was just gluing down this little plastic person.  
Policeman: Eh?  
Slinkachu: Here, look. It's an... er...an art thing. Kind of. I take photos of these little people. Then leave them.  
Policeman: Oh, ha! Cute! Sorry, I thought you were sniffing glue, what with the super glue. We get a lot of that around here.  
Slinkachu: Yeah. Ha...  
Policeman: Yeah, this is cute. Ha a little car too! My kids would love this!  
Slinkachu: Yeah... It's, er... a little prostitute. And a punter. In the car.  
Policemen: ...oh... oh, well, carry on.  
Slinkachu: Er, yeah. Thanks...

(Slinkachu cited in Self, 2008:9)

The size of Slinkachu's work, the tiny scale models suggested to the policemen that his little people were 'cute' and 'sweet' and 'my kids would love this' (Slinkachu cited in Self, 2008:9). It is only when Slinkachu explains the content - a little prostitute/punter situation that the policeman's perception shifted. When the rhythm and regularity of his life was disrupted he was forced to see the unfamiliar in the familiar. Unheimlich.



Figure 10. Slinkachu, 2007. '*They're no pets, Susan.*' Private Collection.

A similar point might also be made about Bertolt Brecht's <sup>9</sup> concept of the alienation effect (or A-effect).

The alienation-effect is not to be pinned down and categorized, as if it were an exotic butterfly. Brecht does not specifically name it as uncanny, but the effect of the alienation-effect can clearly be construed in this way. The A-effect consists, Brecht argued, "...in turning the object [...] from something ordinary, familiar, and immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected." (Royle, 2003:5)

Hotel Modern's show *Shrimp Tales* tells the stories of the lives of the everyday happening of humans. They use microwaved and varnished shells of shrimps to represent humans. The set is made up of a series of scale models on the stage, we see the interiors of the buildings. These boxes are decorated individually - a sitting room, a garden, a church. They are scattered at random around the room and are used when needed, a city of rooms. Matchboxes are petrol pumps and parsley becomes trees.

A shrimp gives birth in a Maternity ward.

A shrimp delivers a baby in a maternity ward.

A shrimp is being buried.

A shrimp buries another shrimp in a graveyard.

A shrimp dances to techno music in a night club.

A shrimp plays techno music in a night club.



In *Shrimp Tales*, Hotel Modern attempt to portray '...the fascinating plague that calls itself mankind. They observe humanity as if it were an exotic species with unique characteristics [...] the roles of humans are played by shrimps.' (Takken, 2009) How does using the miniature make the familiar unfamiliar?

*Hotel Modern* are very cleverly playing with *Unheimlich* on a number of levels here. Firstly, the scale models or portals allow us to see the world from a different perspective, and secondly, by introducing the shrimps to represent us as miniature humans beings maybe we are better able to see and observe ourselves. In Victoria Armstrong's thesis she poses the same question of *The Carpet People* <sup>10</sup> and *Gulliver's Travels*. <sup>11</sup>

'But what might be the authors' purpose in defamiliarising their worlds through the recreation in miniature? Both Pratchett and Swift are contriving to draw the reader's attention to serious matters regarding human nature and society which have long been disregarded due to their ubiquity, and which can now only be noticed by jolting the reader's attention through defamiliarising what they see. The flaws of human nature are evident all the time in our everyday surroundings, and they are certainly seen - but in their familiarity, they are accepted, and great change is generally not wrought to any enduring extent on the long-established faults of human race.' (Armstrong, 2006:5)

It was while completing this, the final chapter of my thesis that I came across Mark Hogancamp. Hogancamp is not an artist who explores the miniature as art; he is a man who lives his life through the miniature as a way of coping with Life.

Mark Hogancamp died eleven years ago tomorrow, when five men kicked his head in outside a Kingston, N.Y., bar in the early morning hours. He was reborn months later, after he awoke from a nine-day coma, his memory wiped nearly clean of the details of his life – his early marriage, girlfriends, family, Navy service, thundering alcoholism, homelessness, jail time – and he had to relearn how to eat, walk and think at age 38. Feeling shunned by the outside world, he created his own world, a tiny society called *Marwencol*. (Green, 2011:1)

*Marwencol* is a 1:6 scale model town set in the World War II era. It is populated by doll versions of Hogancamp's family, friends and neighbours. Hogancamp himself has an alter ego called *Hogie* who owns a bar in the town. Hogancamp spends his life playing/working with these dolls and photographs them as they live out their individual lives. He documents his own life through this miniature life. Jeff Malberg who created the award winning documentary called *Marwencol* <sup>12</sup> on Mark Hogancamp and his model city home explains, 'He photographs the dolls as they live out complex narratives.' (Green, 2011)

'Within each of those stills, there is a story, it's not like [Hogancamp] is photographing these things and thinking, 'I'm going to shoot a really good shot of [G.I.] Joes by the waterfall refilling their canteens because it'll look really beautiful.' That shot of the Joes sitting by the waterfall filling up their canteens has a whole story behind it. He's living this with these people and documenting it himself.' (Marc Hogancamp interview with Savlov, 2010)

In the documentary *Marwencol* Hogancamp explains to a neighbour of his, Ruthie Hotaling, how her doll character Ruthie is doing in *Marwencol* town:

Mark walks into the kitchen. Ruthie's in the kitchen. Mark says "Hey, Ruthie, how's it going?" Ruthie says, "Good, what's my doll doing these days?" And Mark, who I think at this point was mad at Ruthie about something in real life, said: "Oh, your doll got killed by the SS. Sorry." And the look on her face was, like, crushed. (Savlov interviewing Mark Hogancamp: 2010)

The reality of his own life and the reality of his town *Marwencol* are two very different worlds, but although they are different, threads of Mark Hogancamp's life run through the town. For example he uses people he knows to base his characters on and will allow them to have some qualities of their original selves. Mark Hogancamp's own character *Hogie* was beaten up by a group of five German soldiers, resulting in *Hogie* having a scar on the left hand side of his head, the same side of Mark Hogancamp's head that was damaged in his actual assault. The familiarity of his own life made unfamiliar in the life of *Hogie*. Unheimlich.

'That's what the miniature does for me, it creates a society within a society.' (*Marwencol*, 2010)

The most unusual aspect of Hogancamp's work is that he does not consider it work. To him it is a therapy, a way of negotiating his way through life. He does not consider himself an artist. However, the way he perceived *Marwencol* does not diminish the effect that *Marwencol* has on the watchers, it is still uncanny. By viewing *Marwencol*, the miniature world, we feel the same dislocate or disconnect that the audiences in the *Little Hunger* performance experienced.

For me, the vastness of the world has become merely the jamming of these waves. To have experienced miniature sincerely detaches me from the surrounding world, and helps me to resist dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere. (Barchlard, 1969:161)

The small, by its very size, causes 'the jamming of these waves' (Barchlard, 1969:161) and forces a disruption in an audience's way of seeing and perceiving. The Miniature, due to

its scale is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. As such this 'Unheimlich' quality of the miniature is a very potent device or technique for the makers and performers to engage with in the creation of their small worlds for the watchers and audience. To enter your home through the window, instead of the door.



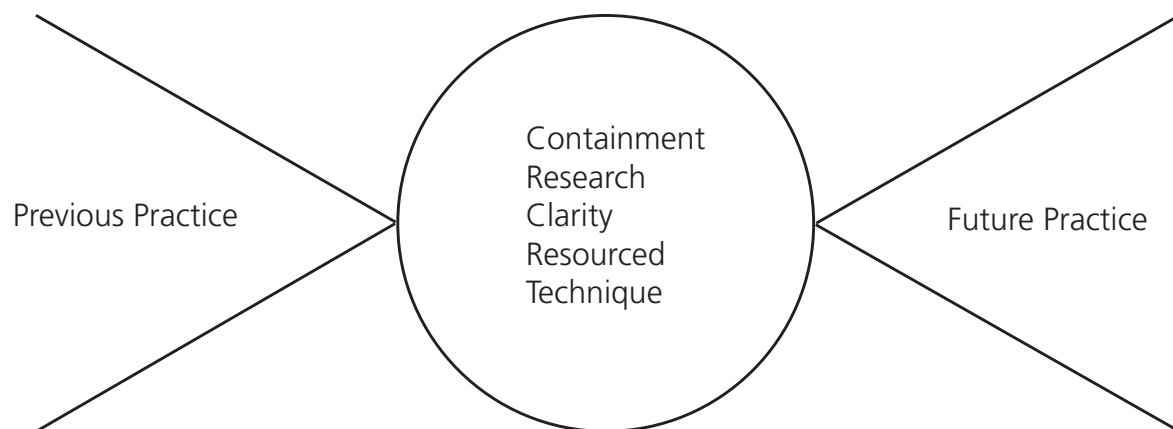
Figure 11. Hogancamp, M., 2010. *Marwencol Still*. [www.marwencol.com](http://www.marwencol.com)

## The Miniature: A Conclusion

In my introduction, I considered how I could explore the notion of the miniature as more than a question of size and scale, and by doing so discover the effects and implications of the miniature for performance. I posed three questions that had arisen out of my previous practice, concerning portals, quantity and the uncanny. As I developed my research for this enquiry, my question on the concept of quantity and multiplicity was replaced with the notion of attention. This was as a direct result of the installation experiment *Matchbox Worlds?* and the responses it generated. I have answered the questions by engaging with writings from philosophers, architecture, literature and by exploring artistic practices, my own and others.

It is evident that the miniature is a powerful tool in the creating and watching of performance and other art forms as it can adjust the reality of the everyday, through transporting a watcher, creating intense focus and it can dislocate a sense of the familiar. However, by answering these questions I have uncovered, as a direct result of this thesis, new concepts that I will address in the future through my practice in the miniature. Mark Hogancamp and the merging between his two realities has caught my attention. I am interested in discovering more about the relationship between the small and the study of the mind through my artistic practice.

At the beginning of this thesis I stated that I would use it as a practical engine in which to launch myself into my future work. To let it form a bridge between my past and future practice. The diagram below demonstrates this bridge.



This thesis has allowed me to distil my ideas and explore other artists' practices that I have uncovered throughout my three year degree. They are all artists that I will take with me. I have also illuminated new corridors of research within the miniature for my future work and have created a foundation on which I can interact from and play upon.

Thus the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The detail of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness. (Bachelard, 1969:155)

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## **Appendix A**

