

No Exit from Pluto



The universe may be a lot smaller than you think, but your loneliness has no bounds. This seems to be the message of *Pluto I*, a dramatic installation by Karl Van Welden of United Planets that takes place in a windowless 30 x 20 foot box. In the Oldenburg edition, the box sits in an idyllic urban park that features a children's playground, a small walking bridge arching over a canal, a feathery green canopy above and solid turf below. This reassuring earthly setting is left behind as you step in through a door in the box, take a chair in a tiny booth, and get a private viewing of Hell.

Through a small letterbox window images begin to take shape: a floor of glowing hot coals, an overturned table, the outline of a man in a chair. A little further back, part of a kitchen sink can just be made out in the half-light. As your eyes adjust, other partial forms emerge: a woman's feet on the edge of the sink; another man rising from the coals. The first man washes the woman's feet. Later he arm-wrestles the second man. The prize appears to be the woman, who remains shrouded, never quite achieving solidity. You get a sense that the scene before you is on an endlessly repeating loop. When I say "you," I mean only you. You are alone in the booth, a sole spectator looking into this otherworld kitchen.

Van Welden says, "We're alone in this world, I think, all of us are alone. I wanted to get that feeling into the piece, for the spectator." He also notes that, despite the unconventional setting, the performance is fairly traditional in structure. There's no dialogue, but there's a story, a protagonist, an antagonist, an upsetting of the status quo and a return to it. It also takes the traditional voyeurism of the modernist theatre experience to the extreme. You are isolated in the dark and focused on the illusion before you. There's no possibility of communion with fellow spectators, or with the performers who are behind thick glass and whose movements are heard only through the headphones you're wearing. You're completely cut off.

So whose loneliness is at issue? The three figures on the other side of the glass play out their animalistic game. For their loneliness to trigger self-awareness of your own isolation, you must again resort to the traditional spectator-performer operation known as "identification." You project yourself into the situation, partly into the "characters" and partly into the atmosphere. The cycle of their failed attempts at meaningful connection becomes yours. Alternatively, you dissociate from the spectacle, refuse empathetic projection, and remain isolated in your booth.

In *Pluto I*, Van Welden manages to shrink cosmic and mythical distance to a suffocating human scale. The dimensions of the box are small, but the world you look into seems to be floating in a void. The figures in it seem stuck to their drifting rock, unable to escape the peculiar gravity of the kitchen. The intimacy of the situation is mostly limited to mute aggression. Van Welden's universe is one of emotional scarcity. The men are desperate. The woman, perhaps once an object of romantic projection for the men, is now a resource—and there's not enough of her to go around. She becomes a commodity. The stronger of the two men will use her as a temporary distraction, indulging in his animal nature for a few moments before being brought back to the fact of his stark aloneness. The woman appears to have no agency. So this is also the patriarch's capitalist universe.

Pluto I is part of a series of performance installations that "visit" each planet in the solar system. "I think every art form is a planet on its own," says Van Welden, "and I tried to put them together. You could call it total theatre, but I don't believe in it in that sense... And then you have the planets on their own... they have their own mythology, but there's also the aspect of the geology of the planet... for instance one day on Mercury is like one year on Earth. So you can put people on that planet and one day will last one year. I think some people experience life in that manner. So you have the mythology and the geology, and I tried to play with those things. In the early days there was an accompanist who made a composition of the planets and every planet was its own composition. It's the same thing I am doing..."

Alex Lazaridis Ferguson

Oldenburg, Germany, PAZZ Festival 2010

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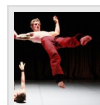


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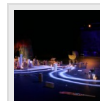
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