



The Bôîtes-en-valise/The Suitcase Museum

History In June 2008, I represented the UK at the OISTAT (International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians) Scenography and Architecture Commission in Stockholm. The commission brings together scenographers and architects from around the world. Originally founded to provide a neutral space for dialogue between artists in Eastern and Western block countries during the Cold War, OISTAT has now broadened its work to support emerging artists from Africa and Asia in the same way.

The commission meetings were hosted in the Museum of Architecture and walking around the museum during a break, I came across fantastical models of a future city made by school children and a small suitcase. The suitcase contained a strange and intriguing collection of objects, and fragments of larger, more well - known works of art.

It had been assembled by an artist called Ivan Moudov and inspired by something called the Bôîtes-en-valise by Marcel Duchamp.

Research Looking up the Bôîtes-en-valise, a switch flicked in my head. Duchamp’s Bôîtes-en-valise were made over the course of his lifetime. He wanted to find a way of displaying his life’s work in miniature and transporting it. There are 300 in total in various major collections around the world.

Eventually, Duchamp placed his personal museum in meticulously made-to-order boxes, but it was this idea of A Suitcase Museum that, for me, held particular resonance for the communities I work with.

Context Drawing on the traditions of travelling salesmen, hawkers and street traders, I wanted to generate live performance by the simplest and most portable means possible. That a community performer could make a story about their life and the place they were from and take it anywhere they wanted to simply by putting one foot in front of the other seemed a powerful and important tool.

Some members of the communities I have worked with have direct experience of homelessness and temporary hostel accommodation. If, at any point, the rigid rules of this accommodation are broken, then eviction often means leaving with just a suitcase. They are unlikely to have either the means, resources or destination to take any of their other preciously acquired belongings with them. The suitcase as a vessel for memories made and still to be made, of identity and moving on was something I wanted to explore.



In October 2008, I travelled to Dunkerque to meet musicians Claude Vanderschueren and Regis Bertin for the first time. Within five minutes of sitting down to eat and drink together, that alchemical reaction between artists working in live performance took place and we all knew that we could work together. Within ten minutes, we had discovered a shared history of Dockyard closure in 1984 in the two communities and the idea for our project was born.

In November 2008, when we found out our funding bid had been successful, I discovered this quote from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who died that year:

' In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure and the police take the place of the pirates'.

I printed it by hand, put it in an empty bottle and took it to my next meeting with Claude.

25 years on, Chatham is still mourning the closure of its Dockyard and the ships passing through are few. 25 years on, Dunkerque's dockyard is all but razed to the ground but Dunkerque has picked itself up, moved on emerging, not for the first time, like a phoenix from the ashes to become the third largest cargo port in Europe.

Claude and I will continue to debate the impact of closure versus erasure on the health and well being of our respective communities.

Performance 'Seeking Closure', of which the Suitcase Museum was the key part, was performed in Chatham Dockyard on 13th and 14th June 2009.

It celebrated the journey so far.

A number of our group have never had a passport before but with those who had secured theirs, we carried The Suitcase Museum, telling the stories of the past, present and future of Chatham to France. We hope it will travel still further and that by the time of our performance next year, everyone involved in the project will have secured this vital proof of identity that makes crossing the physical borders between nations possible.

This is not a museum that stands still in place or time. It is a catalyst for creating confident and proud storytellers, whose performance piece currently finishes with the line *'Like the Dockyard, our suitcase stories are ongoing'*

Our current storytellers are already planning what they want to do next with theirs and we hope that you will be interested in becoming part of this project by bringing your own museum-makers and storytellers on board.

Please find following the brief and the budget that the group were given. We hope that as port cities, you will be interested in contributing your own suitcases to our museum either virtually or actually. The performance element of the project culminates in Dunkerque in June 2010. We intend that The Suitcase Museum will then form an interactive exhibition/installation with the capacity to tour.

There are several ways you can become involved in the project :

- by becoming a partner organisation
- by becoming a sponsor
- by recommending individual young people (18 – 80 +) to join us.

If you are interested in being involved in any of these ways or indeed ways I haven't thought of yet, please contact me :

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The Suitcase Museum

When Claude and I first began to talk about the performance we would make together as a group, we discovered that Dunkerque and Chatham shared a history of Dockyard closure in 1984.

We wanted to use the themes of boats/ships and travel within the project, so to begin by making a portable museum in suitcases seemed like a good idea. All the work that we make together will have to be easily portable between the two countries and this seems a nice way to start sharing our stories with one another. The group in Dunkerque will be doing the same with their stories.



Project Brief

You will each be given a suitcase. Within that suitcase you need to tell the story of past, present and future of the Dockyard and your own story of life here. You can use writing, drawing, photography, video, sound and artefacts to create your portable museum. You can make extensions to it, as shown by the picture above of one of the original Bôites-en-valise by Marcel Duchamp.

You will each have a small budget of £30 to do this with.

The past – this will involve looking at the history of the Dockyard up to the closure in 1984, and particularly at the role and training offered to apprentices. There are also spaces within the Dockyard associated with particular trades such as the Ropery and the Colour Loft and particular materials that were used in that trade.

Do you have a family member who worked in the Dockyard, that you might be able to interview? A neighbour or a friend? If not, then we can arrange for you to interview someone from Chatham Dockyard Historical Society.

We have drawn up a set of questions that we would like to know the answers to but you can also add in your own.

The present – What is left of the Dockyard is used in lots of different ways now by artists and craftspeople, so the plan is that you will also get to visit and 'buddy' with some of them and to find out how they ended up doing what they do.

Within the dockyard now are architects, planners, photographers, sculptors, land artists, blacksmiths and many more. There are also a number of successful artists/musicians such as Billy Childish and Chris Broderick who started out as apprentices in the Dockyard.

The future : This is the bit that represents the dreams and wishes for what lies ahead from here and you can choose to express these as yourself or you can invent the person/character you would like to be, as Duchamp did when he made his museums.

If you could take a ship from Chatham to anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Where might you be in 25 years time or what would you wish for Chatham and the Dockyard in 25 years time? Maybe you want to include something about the regeneration or what you might want for someone who is born here now and will grow up here in the next 25 years.

The Boites-en-valise/ The Suitcase Museum is how we generate the stories that will become part of our performance. To what you make we will add workshops in singing, presentation, drumming and French as we work towards a joint performance with the French group in Dunkerque in June 2010.

The important thing is to enjoy making them – there is no right or wrong way to do it. If there is something you want to do but are not sure how, ask. If I don't know the answer, I'm sure I can find someone who does!

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