

Phillip Barker's **Trust a Boat** – Amsterdam performance (Photos by Phillip Barker)

TRUST A BOAT

a film/performance by
PHILLIP BARKER

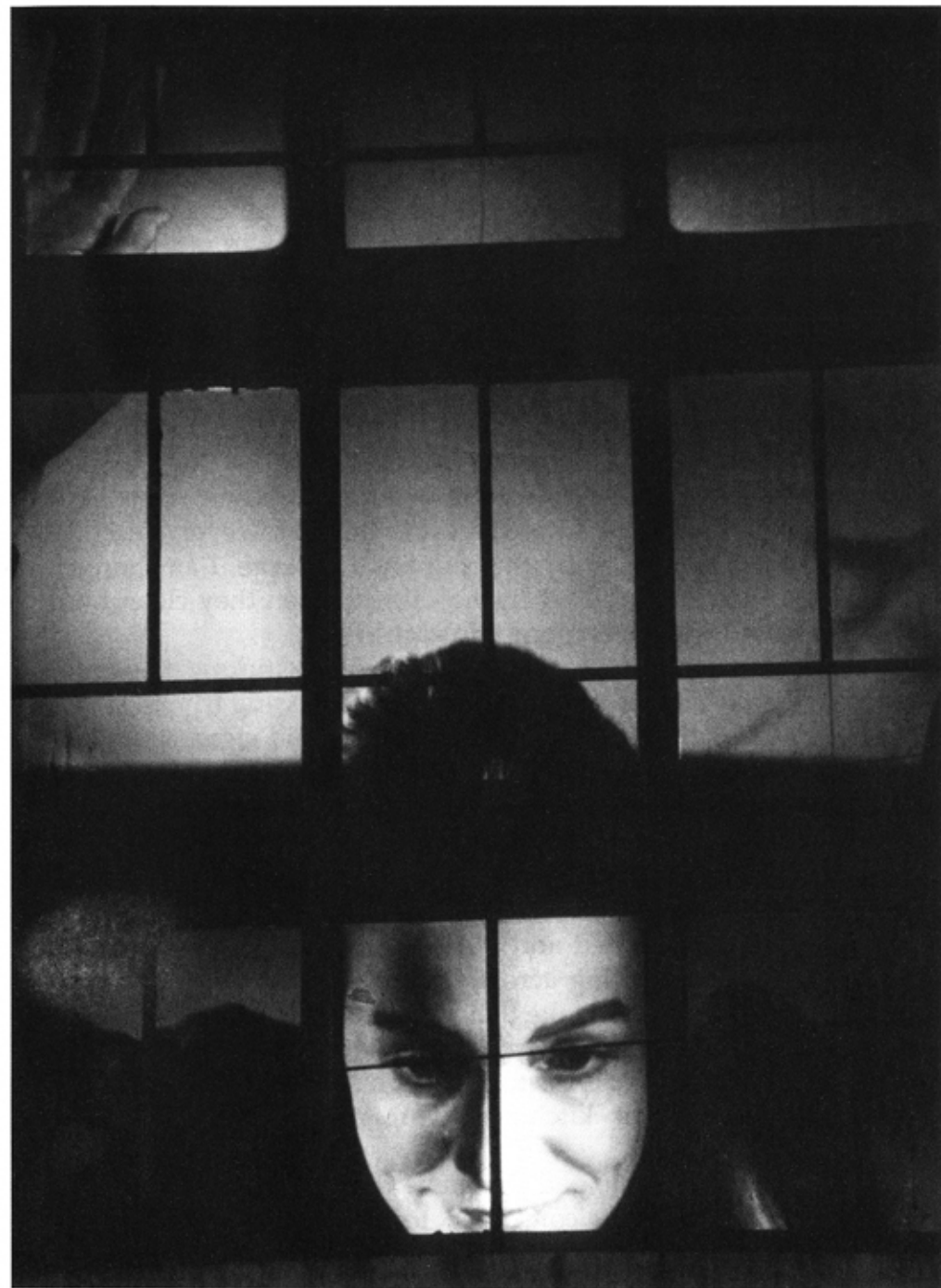
Phillip Barker describes the work, and its origins . . .

An original 35mm film was fragmented into nine 16mm films that together were rear-projected upon 9 windows of a building. The audience, consisting largely of passers-by, saw the event from the street. The project was presented in Amsterdam, Utrecht and Groningen in The Netherlands during 1986, and in Peterborough and Toronto, Canada, during 1987. In the Canadian showings 10 live performers, and an arc-welder on an adjacent rooftop, enacted a silhouetted performance that was choreographed by Dutch dancer-choreographer Marianna Ebbers. The live section, intersecting the film, made for a continual film-performance-film cycle. In total *Trust a Boat* was seen by an estimated 16,000 people.

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FROM my Amsterdam apartment window I can easily see across the street into at least ten other apartments. I can see people going through the motions of their lives, routines mundane and intimate.

To me, these windows are like domestic theatres. From the proscenium window ledges, through curtains of lace that suggest privacy yet arouse curiosity, to the staging of furniture, the apartments are 'dressed' to be seen from the outside by inadvertant voyeurs like myself. I see people talking as they look out their windows — *downstage*, IKEA furniture and other props, post-modern paintings framed by symmetrical lamps, and a bust of Beethoven who, I swear to God, has his face pressed to the glass. *They* look at the *back* of his head!



Patris Moulen in *Trust a Boat* (Photo by Ian Campbell)

It wasn't long before I saw the patterns unfold: figures of men and women return from shops at 5.30 and begin to cook at 6.00. Dinner is ready by 7.00. After dinner, televisions wash the interiors with many beautiful colours. At 11 o'clock, the 11 o'clock news is broadcast on all channels. The same colour images of the world seep synchronously from all windows. The building across the street seems floorless and wall-less like a multi-eyed halloween pumpkin.

* * *

I am the editor of the view from my window. The freedom to montage together any of these unfolding scenes, or to look wide-eyed at them all at the same time. However, I am becoming conditioned by the routines I observe. I am hungry when they eat, tired when they sleep, when they clean I am possessed with deep domestic urges.

Amsterdam houses are built upon big sticks driven into soft sand that was once the ocean floor. Passing trucks gently set my building swaying. Coffee, plants and cigarettes burning in ashtrays rock to and fro like babies in a cradle.

Last night I built a plexiglass model of a building and filled it up with water. I positioned myself and the model at the window in such a way that, with one eye closed, the model seemed to replace the building across the street. Morning approached and the sky reflected blue in the windows of the building across the street and I waited for the Heineken trucks to make their morning deliveries.

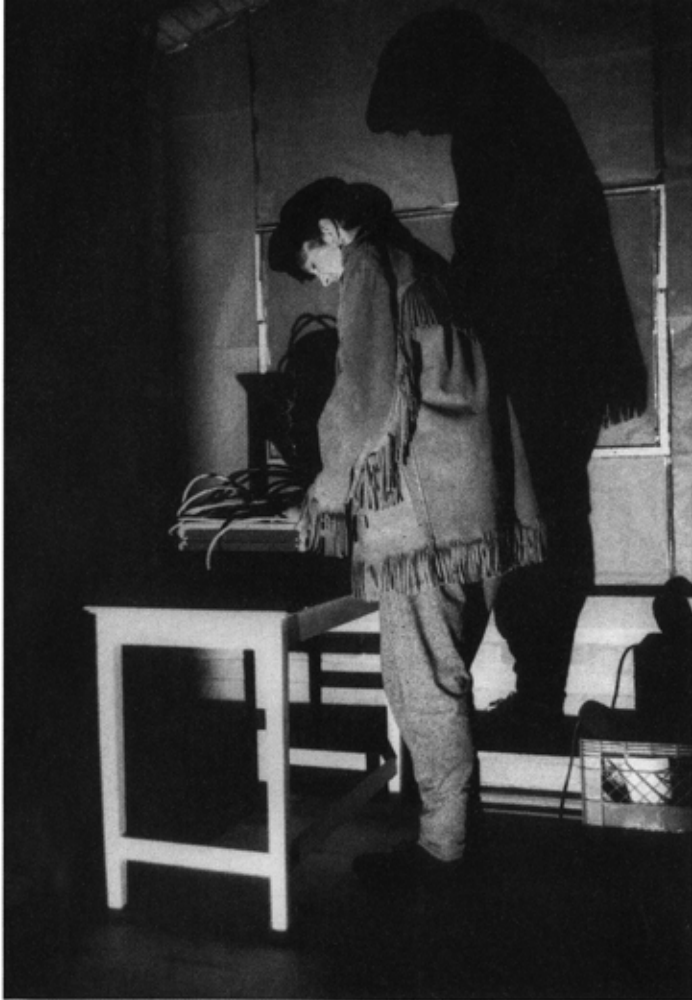
When they came, they rocked the little house of water. As I looked through it across to my neighbours, I saw waves rolling through their kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, and back again.

Somehow this helped to relieve the conditioning that had taken me, yet *they* continued to eat breakfast and ready themselves for work.

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Live performers in *Trust a Boat* (Photo by Ian Campbell)



Live performer behind the screen in *Trust a Boat* (Photo by Billy Kung)

It's 4.00 pm and I'm sitting on a train at a station waiting for it to take me to my bank cleaning job. I am reading Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Lord Jim and three others have abandoned their sinking ship and its cargo of 800 slaves. They are adrift in a lifeboat without any orientation, save for a horizon that stretches 360° around them. To stave off madness they begin to invent their own reality.

Looking out the window, I see that my train begins to move. Do you know that feeling when you're sitting in a train at a station and the train on the next track begins to move? This being your only point of reference, your senses tell you that it is *your* train that is moving.¹

In a small way this disorientation re-oriented myself with my imagination. You could even say that my imagination stretched its legs.

Owing to the effects of different countries, architecture and my own growth, *Trust a Boat* grew and changed its form in many ways. Ways as diverse as the various interpretations from responding viewers. It would have been pointless to colour these interpretations by words from myself. All I can do is recall these initial events wherein I found a loose thread in the garment and pulled.

During those days when I observed my walled-up neighbours I discovered a simple thing about myself. That was, at the risk of sounding pragmatic, my imagination stretches its legs proportionately to the amount of furniture I remove.

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'No fear, no law, no sounds, no eyes — not even our own, till — till sunrise as least . . . It is as if the souls of men floating on an abyss and in touch with immensity had been set free . . . Trust a boat on the high seas to bring out the Irrational that lurks at the bottom of every thought, sentiment, sensation, emotion.'²

¹Thanks to Danniell Danniell

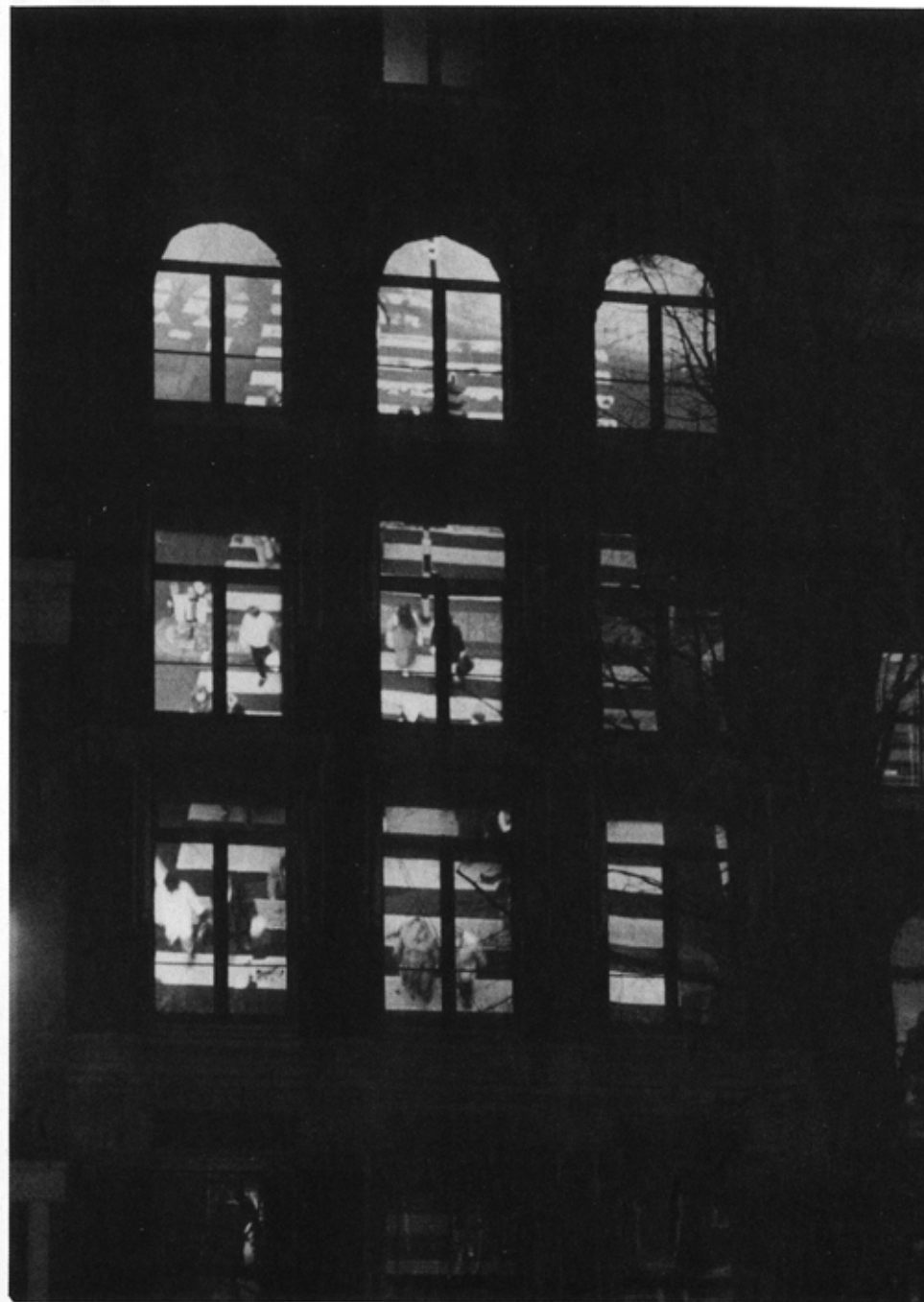
²*Lord Jim*, by Joseph Conrad

(A videotape documenting *Trust a Boat* is available through The Funnel, 11 Soho St., #201, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T126.)

Phillip Barker was born in England in 1955, emigrated to Ontario in 1968 and worked for three years in Amsterdam from 1982 to 1987. Many of his works combine film, sculpture, music and dance. *Trust a Boat*, 'Film-sculpture for a House', was first shown in Amsterdam in a canal house on Keizersgracht in 1986, presented by the gallery Time Based Arts as part of their exhibition 'Installatie Centrale'.

The following description has been adapted by the editors from various reviews supplied by Phillip Barker . . .

Trust a Boat involves live movement and nine synchronised films (derived by printing nine segments from an original 35mm image) projected from within three stories of a building, to be viewed from the street below. The accompanying music is composed by the American John McDowell. In the opening live segment, nine performers each occupy a window and act out choreographed movements in silhouette against paper screens — their habitual everyday routines seem paradoxical when seen together. These live elements are gradually blended into and replaced by the rear projection of a film, raising the question, which image is 'real' and which is film? Each of the nine windows contains a segment of the total image, which might be a huge goldfish swimming from window to window, as if the entire building were an aquarium; a woman's face, colossal in size, spread over four windows and pressed against the glass; huge hands taking up two windows; a high angle shot of people walking over a zebra crossing which occupies all nine windows. The unexpected relationship of the huge images and the relatively small building challenges the viewer's concept of scale as well as one's sense of balance and gravity. The resulting feeling of disorientation is a condition with which the artist enjoys working. Cast adrift, as it were, by these disorientations the viewer's imagination has to come to the rescue and provide a kind of logic suited to the conditions. □



Pedestrian crossing in **Trust a Boat** (Photo by Phillip Barker)

Live performers in **Trust a Boat** (Photo by Billy Kung)