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Poe on Paper, or The Gold-Bug Was Made of Paper: An Ecological Performance Using Paper as Its Sole Material

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**Poe on Paper, or *The Gold-Bug Was Made of Paper*:
An Ecological Performance
Using Paper as Its Sole Material**

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Abstract

The Gold-Bug Was Made of Paper is a performance piece that draws its inspiration from an iconic text by Edgar Allan Poe, while revolving entirely around a simple, everyday yet deeply expressive material: paper. Our intention was not merely to re-enact a story, but to highlight the very process of storytelling — through a medium that speaks, sounds, tears, reflects light — a material that lives and transforms on stage. The performance was conceived specifically for Space Baby, a non-theatrical venue located in the Metaxourgeio neighbourhood of central Athens — a space that allows for intimate interaction with the material and enhances its presence.

Five performers narrate the story of *The Gold-Bug*, drawing directly from Poe's original text. Paper becomes their only scenographic, costuming, sonic, and interactive tool. Poe's work — among the first examples of detective fiction and a milestone in the popularisation of cryptography in literature — is reimagined through the group's artistic language, grounded in the practice of performance writing.

The performance explores the texture and weight of Poe's original text, offering a new rendition through striking visual imagery, created exclusively through the presence of paper on stage. In this piece, paper becomes a full co-performer; it dresses the bodies; produces soundscapes; shapes the space; and sparks action and interaction with the audience.

During each performance, a visual artist creates a unique live artwork, while a musician sonically and vocally supports the unfolding events — drawing directly from the organic soundscape generated by the paper itself. All costumes, accessories, and props are entirely handmade from papers of various textures, densities, and origins: tracing paper, wax paper, posters, old stock books, wrapping paper, and newspapers. Lighting was designed to make full use of the shadows, translucency, and textures that paper can generate on stage. An ecoscenographic approach is central to the project. The paper used in each performance is repurposed for the next. At the end of the performance cycle, the material is directed to recycling, completing a circular artistic process.

Keywords: site specific performance, eco scenography, paper, Edgar Allan Poe

Poe on Paper: A Performance of Writing, Materiality, and Participation

The performance *Poe on Paper The Gold-Bug Was Made of Paper* was a creative action exploring the relationship between body, materiality, and narration through the medium of paper. The point of departure was Edgar Allan Poe short story *The Gold-Bug*, a tale of mystery and fantasy, which was scenically and spatially transformed into an open installation performance, aiming to offer a participatory and experiential encounter of the story.

Figure 1

After the revelation of the golden scarab – performer Danai Panagi (photo: Eva Poulizou).



The central question was: how can a story be written and unfold on paper — literally, spatially, corporeally, and sonically — beyond conventional reading? Paper was not merely used as a medium for writing, but as the primary material of the scenic action — as space, costume, sound, and map. The entire performance space — both floor and walls — was covered in paper of various sizes and origins: plain white paper, recycled sheets, old street posters, commercial paper bags, greaseproof paper, and maps. These layers became more than scenography: they served as the canvas upon which traces, letters, words, shapes, and paths were marked and activated. The slightly adapted story featured a once-wealthy man, yearning for the luxury of his past, attempting to regain it without effort. A shy, reserved friend accompanies him on a treasure hunt, while his only servant — who constantly confuses left and right — plays a crucial and confusing role. This triangular dynamic raised the question: are these three distinct characters, or three facets of a single

self? Three performers embodied these characters, constantly shifting between roles, narrative voice, and gesture. In one pivotal moment, when the hero recounts their night journey across the mountains, the performers pressed their bodies against the paper-covered walls while one traced the other's outline with charcoal. These imprints marked the space with corporeal memory.

Figure 2

Poe's figure rendered in charcoal during the performance (photo: Eva Poulizou).



A key element of this performance was the audience's transition between different spaces. At first, the performer — an invisible singer — welcomed the audience in the exterior area, where, together with a disguised sound technician, they playfully misled the spectators, chasing them with small paper scarabs in a bluff-like action.

Once the audience entered the main space, they could choose to sit on the arranged chairs, remain standing, or even sit on the floor, which was entirely covered in paper. The action unfolded as the characters changed their paper costumes to reflect each new transformation, with all three performers simultaneously shifting from one character to another. All stage effects, except for the main lighting, were created using paper: paper confetti falling from above, the appearance of a giant golden scarab, shadow theatre play, and then a transition to the next space of the performance. According to Richard Schechner, the real takes place in the here and now, rendering any reference to past events relevant to the present. It consists of successive, non-retractable actions within a given space, while the participants perceive the entire process as a transformation.

Consequently, they are led to acknowledge that something of great significance for them is at stake as the event unfolds (Schechner, 1970, as cited in Carlson, 2014, p.177).

Figure 3

Mary Contantinou, Katerina Liapopoulou, Danai Panagi in the first performance area (photo: Eva Poulizou).



This next area was a rectangular wooden room, featuring a paper tree that unfolded and welcomed the audience. The entire scenography and props in this space were also made of paper — measuring tapes, smaller scarabs, amongst other things. When the characters finally reached the hidden treasure chest, a riddle awaited the audience to solve. The riddle was written on the columns of the space, and as the audience was offered a small glass of cognac — both to warm them up from the biting December cold of Athens and the night on the mountain of treasure — they were invited to solve the word puzzle in order to gain access to their own symbolic treasure.

All materials from the performance's scenographic footprint were destined for recycling, a fact that was ritually declared at the end of the performance. The paper used in the first

show was largely reused in the second, in line with principles of Ecoscenography,¹ and materials from the second were again reused in the third. In the fourth performance, after all scenographic elements had fulfilled their symbolic and performative purpose, the materials were finally directed toward recycling. This entire process took place through a ritual defined by the group of interpreters themselves. The aim was the appropriation of the Other by bridging the spectator with this practice as well as with the mode of functioning of the group. The regulation of a society's relationship with otherness, as an uncontrolled source of events, is structured through a set of activities that, in Anthropology, is known as 'rituals' (Stavridis, 2018, p. 190).

Figure 4

Performer Mary Constantinou (photo: Eva Poulizou).



At the end of the performance, each silhouette was labeled with one of the three characters' names. The audience was invited to fill these figures with words, phrases, colours, or symbols that intuitively resonated with each personality. Through this act, the narration became a shared process, and the spectators were subtly invited to reflect on the

¹ Eco-scenography is a concept developed by Tania Beer (2021) regarding ecological design for performance.

core question: do these figures represent different individuals, or the fragmented aspects of a single psyche? In Performance Art, there is no interpretation of a character role. Yet, two presences emerge as one: that of the Performer who structures the performative framework, and that of the Performer who recalls or re-enacts an experience through the enactment of the unconscious within the body (Mitrou, 2023, p. 60).

Figure 5

Performers Mary Contantinou, Katerina Liapopoulou, Danai Panagi and Asimina Koutsogianni (photo: Eva Poulizou).



Costumes were also made entirely from paper: greaseproof sheets, newspapers, and fabric-paper hybrids. The fragility of the material underlined themes of transformation and decay. As the performers moved, their garments created friction, breath, and rhythm — sonic elements that enriched the performance texture. A musician roamed through the space like a storytelling elf. She created live soundscapes using only paper: folding, crumpling, tearing, blowing through paper tubes, whispering through rolls. These paper-generated sounds accompanied the story and movements, inviting the audience into a multisensory narrative environment.

Audience participation was an integral part of the performance. Scattered throughout the space were simple written or drawn instructions on paper sheets. Audience members were free to engage with them: wrapping themselves in paper, shaking it, cutting it, folding

or simply observing it. There was no right or wrong way to interact: the paper became an extension of their intuition and presence.

Performance writing, as applied in this context, is not just writing for or on stage. It is a weaving of materiality, embodiment, and narration. Writing emerged from bodies, sounds, and actions. The paper became a projection surface, an expressive tool, and a collective diary.

The question was not just what is being narrated, but how. With which materials? Who is invited to participate? And what remains afterwards? In the end, all marks on the paper — words, smudges, sketches, footprints — constituted a second story, a polyphonic map of the collective experience.

Perhaps, then, Poe does not only live in his words, but in the traces left by those who stepped into his story, on a stage made of paper.

Figure 6

The four performers (photo: Evi Poulizou).



Conclusion

In conclusion, the performance highlighted how a single recyclable object can be transformed into a set, a costume, or a partner, transcending its everyday function. The audience's experiential participation, across multiple spaces of a closed studio — even culminating in the solving of a riddle — emphasised the collective dimension of a group of people sharing a common experience in a given moment, and how this reduces distance as they spontaneously converge to resolve a mystery. Finally, the action raised open questions about how performance can exist with a minimal environmental footprint, with limited energy consumption, and how it contributes to building a new relationship with the object, leaving space for further exploration.

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