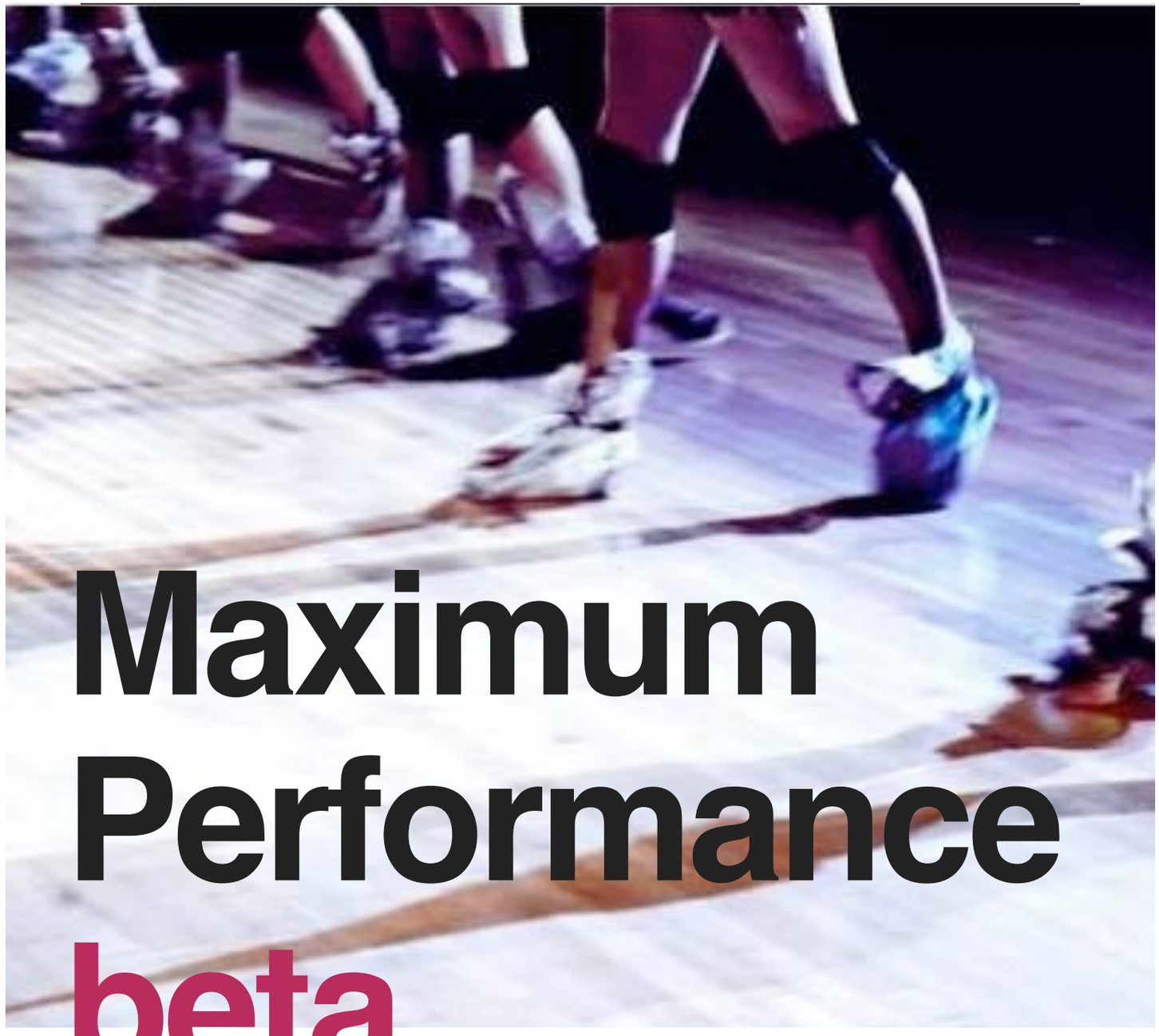
First Edition



Maximum Performance beta

a collection of essays from Culturebot.org (2011-2013)

Andrew Horwitz

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Dedication

These essays would not have been possible without the support and contributions of many, many people, particularly NYC's remarkable and resilient community of performing artists.

I'd like to thank Mark Russell for taking a risk on Culturebot back in 2003, when it was little more than an idea, and for his ongoing generosity and support over the years.

Thanks to Jeremy M. Barker without whose contributions as a writer, colleague, co-conspirator, sparring partner and drinking buddy these essays would probably never have been written.

I gratefully acknowledge the friends and colleagues who have exposed me to new ideas, supported my crazy whims and provided me with opportunities to grow: Elise Bernhardt, Ron Berry, Lane Czaplinski, Vallejo Gantner, Frank Hentschker, Kristin Marting, Sam Miller, Geoffrey Jackson Scott, Risa Shoup, Meiyin Wang, Jay Wegman, Dana Whitco, and Lucien Zayan ,to name just a few.

And most of all, thank you to Deborah, for everything.

Foreword

Technically, a foreword is written by someone other than the author to explain why the book you are about to read is important. But this is written by me, Andy Horwitz - the founder of Culturebot.org, the author of these essays and the publisher of this “beta” version of *Maximum Performance*.

I call it beta because the essays included are published her pretty much unedited from how they first appeared online. I have written many more essays since and my ideas continue to evolve over time.

I’m quite certain there are typos, broken links and other mistakes in this edition, but given ephemeral the nature of the Internet, I decided to self-publish this collection now to provide background for the ongoing discourse on Culturebot.org. My hope is that this “working draft” will serve as a map of the conceptual ground covered so far and as an indicator of what is to come.

Many, many thanks to Ashley Chang for organizing and formatting these collected essays in iBook Author, this would not have been possible without her work.

I hope you enjoy reading and I look forward to continuing the conversation online, offline and in future editions!

-Andy Horwitz (Brooklyn, 2014)

On Criticism

Why Aren't Audiences Stupid? // Culturebot and The New Criticism // Dance Criticism and the Changing World // Re-Framing The Critic for the 21st Century: Dramaturgy, Advocacy and Engagement

Why Aren't Audiences Stupid?



I tried to post this as a comment over at HuffPo, but it was too long. So here goes:

"This is a scary trend." – Really?

God forbid that the actual audience should have a place to voice their response to a work of art. But maybe that should be restricted to talkbacks? I've always believed that art encourages questions whereas entertainment confirms what we already know. The magic of live performance – even the most traditional forms – is that the audience is never really a passive watcher – they are engaged and their response informs the performance. The internet as a forum for authentic feedback and reaction is vital to the growth, development and continued relevancy of the discipline.

As to Kaiser's lament about the death of criticism – if the commercial media are no longer able or willing to subsidize arts coverage (how many cities actually have a "local professional critic" anymore?) and Kaiser feels that criticism is an essential part of the arts ecology, then why haven't foundations stepped in to support the field? I've run Culturebot.org since December 2003. Over the past eight years I have met with numerous funders who express their admiration of and appreciation for what I do but are unable or unwilling to provide funding. The Andy Warhol Foundation supports visual arts writing including blogs – artfagcity.com has received several large grants – but there is no support for performing arts writers and critics. Because the visual arts world is in the business of creating objects or sale, it recognizes the importance of criticism and writing to creating perceived value around art. The performance world has yet to glom onto that and as a result the work continues to be undervalued.

At Culturebot.org we have provided many, many artists with their first reviews and exposure, we have opened a window into the sometimes murky and non-transparent world of contemporary performance – and the process behind making the work. We have fostered dialogue and become an important resource for curators, presenters, artists and aficionados. Not to mention the support we've been able to give aspiring writers and critics by giving them access to artists, performances and administrators, a forum for honing their voice and an opportunity to foster discussion. And we do it for free, because we care about the arts and we want to participate.

Are we amateurs? No. Kaiser's derogatory use of the term indicates a startling lack of respect for audience members and a lack of knowledge about the composition of that audience. He might be surprised to learn how many people in the audience actually know what they are talking about. Not everyone can afford to get a Master's in arts administration, criticism, dance, theater, etc., only to come into a job market where your best option is a $30K/yr, 60hr/wk job in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Much less take time off from their life to study with Kaiser in the Kennedy Center Fellowship for Arts Management. Thus the established arts infrastructure tends to skew to people who are either willing to live penuriously or have other resources to draw from.

Even fewer people can make a living as an artist.

So the audience for the arts – and the people who are passionate enough to frequent cultural institutions, comment on their sites or start their own blogs – are frequently educated, knowledgeable, committed individuals who, you know, have actual jobs. They are artists and former artists, they are friends and families of artists, they are people who grew up or into an appreciation of the arts for any number of reasons but, because of the necessities of making a living, are relegated to "amateur" status. Sure there are some ill-informed writers and commenters out there, but as I've

watched arts writing on the internet evolve over the past eight years I've been surprised by the quality of writing, the knowledge of the writers and the vitality of the discussion.

It is, frequently, the programmers and the arts institutions that are completely out of touch with audiences, that make no effort to actually engage audiences and communities in the process of making art or curating seasons. The infrastructure is not transparent or responsive to the community. Structured talkbacks are insufficient and if you are a presenter who produces challenging work, you should probably do some kind of humanities program that contextualizes what is being presented, offering the audience a 360-degree view, rather than just demanding that they submit to your aesthetic preferences. This doesn't happen. Most arts institutions just present what they present as if it were a gift from on high and expect us to appreciate their refined tastes and sensibilities. Guess what? Most of us went to college, too! Most of us read, see work, are informed about current events and aesthetic engagement with the world at large; most of us have been art-makers, or writers, or supporters at any number of levels and our opinions are not only important – they're kind of the only opinions that matter. After all, we're the audience. And if a tree falls onstage and no-one is there to see it, is it performance?

Kaiser's article reflects how out of touch many in the arts establishment are with the reality on the ground – it is sad and frustrating. Considering how much influence he has it is a shame that he is so reactionary and ill-informed, so unwilling to affect actual change and innovation.

Culturebot and The New Criticism

The past few months have been really pivotal here at Culturebot and it feels like we're moving into a new era. A lot of the things we've done casually or sporadically over the years are being formalized and, for the first, time, I've been able to articulate some of the ideas around what we've been practicing for more than eight years. I thought I'd take this opportunity to share with you, our audience and community, where we came from, what we're thinking about and what we're working on over the next twelve months and into the future.

CULTUREBOT HISTORY

When I first started thinking about Culturebot in late 2002, I had already been online for a while. I started a personal website back in 1998. I remember working at an ad agency in 1999 and pitching my co-workers on a website that would help people who met online and had similar interests to meet off-line and have social gatherings. They laughed and said that no-one would want to do that. If I only had understood what VC was at the time!

Technically I began "blogging" in late 2000 or early 2001, shortly after Blogger first became available. In the early days of blogging there weren't so many of us in NYC – or anywhere – and I remember when we'd all get together and drink and socialize – Choire, Jonno, Blaise, Ultrasparky, Uffish – where it was not uncommon to ask someone, "What's your URL?" before you knew their name. Eventually Nick Denton swept into town and scooped up the most popular bloggers to be his editors and help launch his empire. But I saw firsthand the power of blogging to build communities both of interest and of practice, before the money and the book deals came to town.

I have the dubious distinction of being the first person (or among the first, anyway) to blog 9/11. That moment amplified, for me, what blogging could mean and could become. As someone who provided a first-hand, eyewitness account of the events of the day, in real time, on the internet, and who received comments, e-mails and responses from around the world instantaneously, I realized that things were very different from before, that the world was smaller and people more connected, that the internet had changed what was possible. It was amazing that we could really, truly share our experiences quickly and personally without intermediation, and that communities could come into existence and vanish in moments.

Shortly after founding Culturebot, I was at a PS122 party with my friend Chris Hampton, complaining about the impending doom of Valentine's Day. We decided to hold the first-ever all-blogger reading/performance event – "Worst.Sex.Ever" at PS122. The event attracted about 250 people, we had to turn people away, and it became an ongoing series called The WYSIWYG Talent Show, where over the course of three years we presented (and frequently debuted) a lot of people who went on to be quite well-known including (but not limited to) Emily Gould, Paul Ford, Todd Levin, Jessica Delfino, Faustus, M.D., Choire Sicha, Mike Daisey, Chelsea Peretti, Ron Mwangaguhunga and Ned Vizzini. We also presented the first video blogger film fest, to my knowledge.

I started working at PS122 in the spring of 2002 and over the first six months I made two key observations. First, general audiences didn't seem to have much knowledge of or context for the work being presented. They knew the solo shows – the Danny Hoch/John Leguizamo stuff – but the more difficult or esoteric work – Yasuko Yukoshi, Richard Maxwell, dance in general, etc. – had a very small audience of downtown denizens and not much else. At the same time, there was almost no public space for dialogue around "downtown" or "contemporary" performing arts, nowhere to share ideas or trace histories, lineages and connections. Artists and audiences alike frequently came to the New York – and PS122 – with only the vaguest sense of what they were seeing and how to engage with it. I had been in NYC since 1995, originally as a writer/performer who frequented PS122 as an audience member, and I still had only the vaguest notion of how the Ontological was connected to the Wooster Group was connected to PS122, what Judson was, what DTW was and how all these pieces fit together. I knew that there was a need and an opportunity to share information and knowledge, to build awareness and also create an ongoing, evolving, real-time document of performance in NYC. Thus Culturebot was developed as a collaborative, community-oriented web resource providing critical insight and conversation to practitioners, administrators and audiences at one. Our goal then, as now, was to be deeply informed and thoughtful while remaining accessible to a wide readership.

Initially I wanted Culturebot to be a group endeavor and I invited the marketing directors of all the major contemporary presenting institutions to a meeting at PS122 where I pitched them on participating. I said here was a chance to build community and at the same time provide a counterbalance to the hegemony of the NY Times. Apart from Aaron Rosenblum, who was working at DTW at the time, they all looked at me like I had three heads and said it was unnecessary and besides, who had the time to write for a website? They were already so busy designing postcards and printed brochures and organizing bulk mailings and print ad campaigns. So I took a deep breath and soldiered on, launching the site in December 2003.

When Culturebot first launched it was meant to exist in contrast to the "reviewer-oriented" model of mainstream news outlets like the New York Times. At first we only published previews, interviews and points-of-view, intending to serve the community and the field at large in an informational and dramaturgical capacity, creating space for conversation and dialogue, meeting the work at its own level, not from a place of judgement. However, early-career artists, existing under the radar of mainstream outlets, often requested to be reviewed. Culturebot responded, becoming an advocate for emerging artists by providing early reviews and critical feedback. Many artists who are now more well-known got their first write-ups here and we still try to cover early-career artists as best we can.

In October of 2007 I left PS122 and brought the site with me. Although Culturebot was initially funded by an NPN grant to PS122 for community outreach, we never received ongoing financial support from the institution and this was a big moment. For the first time Culturebot was its own thing, separate from a respected organization, and we had to sink or swim. We're still swimming!

NEW MODELS AND NEW VOICES IN ARTS WRITING

When I was at PS122 Mark Russell always made a big deal about not putting work into categories. He strongly believed in the idea that dance, theater, performance art, music and time-based performative events, etc., all exist in this universe and that that is performance. He drilled that into me and over time I've come to adhere to that philosophy ever more strongly. I dislike putting labels on the work and most of the artists I'm interested in are creating outside the boundaries of traditional discipline structures. This previously unarticulated perspective has finally become the norm, as reflected in the curatorial statement from Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders, from the Whitney Biennial:

> *…artists are functioning as researchers and curators, drawing on the histories of art, design, dance, music, and technology. Artists are bringing other artists into their work—a form of free collage or reinvention that borrows from the culture at large as a way of rewriting the standard narratives and exposing more relevant hybrids. There is also the radical production of new forms, fabrication on a more modest scale. Artists are constantly redefining what an artist can be at this moment...*

This, however, highlights the unique challenge of this moment, which is that of context. As museums rediscover performance, dance and to a lesser extent theater, incorporating it into their programming, performing arts spaces are being left out of the conversation entirely. Years of knowledge, dramaturgy, theory and practical expertise are being consigned to the dustbins as visual arts curators apply a different set of critical criteria to the evaluation and interpretation of the performed art. Still heavily reliant on the critical theories of performance from the 60s, visual art tends to reject craft in favor "authenticity" and be wary of mimesis and theatricality. So when they look at dance and theater, they are not, generally, critically equipped to make knowledgeable evaluations. They also don't have any production infrastructure or knowledge, nor do the curators have experience working with performing artists to develop projects over time. I've already talked about this at great length and won't rehash here. Suffice it to say that never before has the conversation about "The Black Box versus the White Cube" been more important.

Having spent my formative years outside the visual arts world, I was mostly unaware of the conversation and discovered it when I was curating PRELUDE 2008, and that topic became the focus of the festival. During the curatorial process a colleague brought to my attention Harold Skramstad's seminal 1999 article "An Agenda for American Museums In the 21st Century" (online here, downloadable 10MB PDF here). It is an incredibly thoughtful and powerful article and, I think, possibly

responsible for the current trends in museum curating and the rediscovery of performance. In the conclusion of his essay Skramstad writes:

> *The great age of collection building in museums is over. Now is the time for the next great agenda of museum development in America. This agenda needs to take as its mission nothing less than to engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives. We have many practical institutions to help us work through our day-to-day problems. We have enough educational institutions that focus on training us to master the skills we need to graduate from school and get a job. Yet we have too few institutions that have as their goal to inspire and change us. American museums need to take this up as their new challenge. Up to now much of their time has been devoted to building their collections and sharing them through "outreach" to the larger world. Now they must help us create the new world of "inreach," in which people, young and old alike, can "reach in" to museums though experiences that will help give value and meaning to their own lives and at the same time stretch and enlarge their perceptions of the world.*

So what we have, then, is a wholesale re-imagining of the purpose and function of the art museum. Performing arts spaces should probably do a similar re-evaluation, but that is another essay for another time. But what this means, and in fact demands, is that as artists work increasingly across and outside traditional boundaries of discipline and as institutions adapt to create boundary-less contexts for the work artists are making, it is necessary to cultivate a critical voice and style of writing that meets the work on its own terms. As the lines between dance, theater, music, performance art, video and visual art are becoming less and less defined, we need new critics who can travel with the work and the imagination of the artist. At the same time we need a community of writers who can share their skills and expertise, who bring a collective pool of knowledge to bear on this ever-expanding and evolving cultural landscape. We need to bring visual arts, performing arts, music, film and new/emerging media writers together to develop a new criticism that reflects this cultural landscape and the environment in which this discourse increasingly occurs – online.

As mentioned earlier, Culturebot was always meant to exist in contrast – even in opposition – to the "reviewer-oriented" model of mainstream news outlets like the New York Times. The traditional "reviewer-oriented" model of newspaper-based arts writing is predicated on advising the potential consumer whether a given performance is worth the investment of time and money. We reject that. We propose to distinguish the performing arts from corporately manufactured consumer-focused entertainment products and apply a different framework for analysis and dialogue.

At the same time as we distinguish between a consumer-oriented "reviewer" and a critic, so too do we distinguish between an old-model critic and The New Criticism. The traditional critical model proposes a "subject/object" relationship between writer and performance where the critic "objectively" judges the merits of a given performance. Culturebot proposes a new framework for arts criticism that we refer to as "critical horizontalism". In this framework criticism is a creative practice unto itself and the writer exists in subjective relation to the work of the artist. The writer's response is the continuation of a dialogue initiated by the artist. If this response is then published on the Internet, this creates a horizontal field of discourse with the work. This model resists the commodification of the performing arts as "entertainment", instead situating it as time-based art. The performance itself is an ephemeral nexus where audience, artist and ideas converge. The critic supports the continued investigation of the art event across multiple platforms.

This theoretical framework is expressed in practical terms as well. As a primarily web-based endeavor, Culturebot's aesthetics have been informed by our environment. We started as a blog and have evolved with the web as it has changed. We are influenced by the evolving and interconnected world of social media and strive to continue developing the voice we are known for – intelligent but familiar, rigorous but accessible, frequently informal and conversational. It is not that we can't write like academics, it is that we choose not to. We choose not to employ

jargon when plainer language will suffice. When possible and appropriate, we provide links to the work of our academic colleagues for our readers' reference if they choose to investigate.

Culturebot's mission it to be deeply informed and generally accessible, to provide a platform for dialogue and the resources for deeper, more thoughtful investigation. Our hope is to continue providing a platform for artists, administrators, curators and audiences to hold conversations, to establish relationships with other arts writers online, continue to develop new critical voices that reflect the aesthetics of the Information Age. We plan to work with professional journalists and new media innovators to identify a writing style and practice that reflects and engages with the new cultural landscape. This is writing intended for the Internet, criticism from a networked perspective.

LIVE CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

In January 2012 Meiyin Wang invited Culturebot to work with Under The Radar to curate, produce and moderate two panel discussions as part of the festival. Around the same time, in response to the essay "Visual Art Performance vs. Contemporary Performance", Culturebot was invited to participate in a group exhibition at the Exit Art Gallery in New York City. That project, Ephemeral Evidence, will be happening from April 17-21, 2012 and more details will be announced shortly.

The convergence of these two things led us to start thinking about Criticism As Creative Practice and Culturebot's dramaturgical role in our community. In Ephemeral Evidence we have paired Culturebot writers with performing artists to create durational performances that will leave objects as evidence of the ephemeral event. The writers are responsible for creating the contextual writing in collaboration with the artists and being a part of the creative process. We believe that the New Criticism means that writer/critics should engage more deeply and over time with artists, so that they can provide meaningful dialogue in public space.

Developing Ephemeral Evidence informed our thinking about "Live Critical Intervention". After the success at Under The Radar we were invited by Ron Berry to do an "as-yet-undefined-something" at the Fusebox Festival in Austin, TX. We really weren't interested in replicating the same old model of panel discussions and artist talkbacks that everyone always does, so we started thinking about how we could restructure these important critical conversations in more interesting, performative ways. Thus Live Critical Interventions are our attempt to put "critical horizontalism" into practice. We started researching, analyzing the intellectual structures and presentational aesthetics of panels and talkbacks and identifying ways to subvert and undermine them. We are using existing techniques such as Lois Weaver's "Long Table" and Everybodys Toolbox's "Impersonation Game" as source material, while creating new interventions as a scalable framework to support the democratization of criticism and the idea of criticism as social practice. We will be at Fusebox from May 3-6, 2012 and will be presenting three "interventions" – more info on that to come. We have received a commission to develop this project over the next twelve months and will debut the project in March 2013. We can't announce where yet, but we will soon.

ONWARD AND UPWARD, BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Here at Culturebot HQ we're incredibly excited to continue pioneering new landscapes in art, culture and ideas. We are leading the charge for a new way of engaging with performance and criticism and are looking forward to creating public platforms for conversation and dialogue. The next twelve months will bring significant change and growth, we look forward to evolving from our humble blog origins into a new, multi-platform content creating networked robot of the future, replicating memes and busting rhymes like nobody's business.

If you want to get on board, now's the time. You know where to find us.

Dance Criticism and the Changing World



At 9:30AM on a beautiful Sunday morning, June 24, 2012 to be exact, I headed over to the Alvin Ailey Center for a panel about "Snark & Praise", which was organized by Philip Sandstrom at the Dance Critics Association Conference. The other folks on the panel included Jennifer Edwards of the Edwards & Skybetter Change Agency LLC, Anna Drozdowski of thINKingDANCE.net, Robert Johnson, long time dance critic for the NJ Star-Ledger and fellow C-bot team member Maura Donohue.

It was an interesting conversation which I'm not going to re-cap here, for many reasons. The entire discussion was videotaped by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, with said documentation going directly into the archive, and no plan (that I know of) to make it available online. Which in many ways embodies why the panel, by its very nature and through no fault of the organizer or participants, was so frustrating.

Basically Philip put out the question, "Is there a role for snark in dance criticism and how do we handle doling out praise?" An interesting question about tone in writing about work. Personally, I don't use snark so much in my writing. I'm just not generally a snarky person. Sometimes it manifests, but mostly I prefer to take my time and write a withering, well-considered and thoughtful take-down. I don't have a word limit, I don't have deadlines, I don't have an editor pushing me to be more negative, controversial and boost my page views (see: the managed exit of Deborah Jowitt from The Village Voice), so I have the luxury of really reflecting on why I disliked something and putting it out there when I've really digested it and tweaked my writing. That being said, I have nothing against snark per se. Certainly I have been delighted to read a reviewer's bitchy takedown of an artist who I think deserves it (as rare as that may be). But snark does not play a big part in my own writing practice.

And thus the panel, almost inevitably, began to open up the much wider question of what is a critic, how do we see our role and how do we express our opinions on (or responses to) the work we see? Who is our audience and what does that mean in terms of how we write? It was frustrating from my perspective because it feels as if those writers who have had the experience of having a steady job reviewing for the arts in a major newspaper find all the web-based writers threatening and hostile. I really don't think most "bloggers" – which is a bit of a misnomer these days – think of themselves as actively opposing newspapers and "Big Journalism". Although some web-based arts reviewers may see themselves and their work in correlation with Big Journalism, many more think of what we do as something distinctly different.

The panel opened, coincidentally, with Anna, Maura, Jennifer and myself all clearly stating that we did not see ourselves as "critics" in the traditional sense, that we shied away from "reviews" and focused more on interviews, points of view, profiles, thought pieces, etc. Here at Culturebot when we first started it was a conscious choice NOT to replicate the "review" model of MSM, but rather to only do interviews, previews and points of view. Over time artists (especially emerging artists) began to ask for reviews to get them started and fill out their press kits and we complied, but "reviewing" was never our main intention.

The panel kind of went downhill from there and we left a lot unsaid, so I want to articulate my position on the changing role of criticism and the way the medium shapes the message.

Let's start with the newspaper as a platform. I'm not a historian (and please, historians, chime in!), but from what I understand, the first big heyday of the newspaper was 18th & 19th century London. With the rise of the merchant class (bourgeoisie) came a rise in literacy and a widening group of consumers with

disposable income. The newspaper, easy to produce and distribute, was the perfect medium to get information out to many people quickly and efficiently. I imagine that as more people took in entertainments of all kinds from books and broadsheets to theater, dance, music and other spectacles, there arose a parallel need for reviews to guide these consumers in their choices. In England – and everywhere else in the Western World – the Industrial Revolution brought more and more people into the cities who may have been literate but not educated, as merchants were wealthy but not "refined". So there was a perceived need for an arbiter of quality and value. I'm certain that someone has traced the entire history from Gutenberg to yesterday, and I'll leave that be, but the entire system is predicated on commerce and persists to this day.

So the conditions of the origins of print journalism define the nature of the writing it contains. Perhaps, for a few brief moments in the mid-20th Century at the New York Times and a few other places, "criticism" existed in newspapers. But mostly I would suggest – particularly since the 1980s – arts writing in general interest newspapers is "reviewing". To me, criticism as a practice rests on the assumption that the critic has a specific outlook, philosophy or framework that they apply to a work of art and, using historical, aesthetic, philosophical and formal precedents, analyze and (hopefully) amplify and illuminate the work in question. A value judgement can be made (good/bad) but is not required. "Reviewing", on the other hand, is the practice of assessing quality from a consumer-oriented perspective, serving as a kind of Consumer Protection Bureau for ticket-buyers. While some reviewers may be more informed than others, some better writers than others or more thoughtful, articulate and dedicated to the art itself, ultimately reviewers are tasked with telling potential audience members whether a show is worth paying for. Their target audience is a general audience, your average newspaper reader of undetermined education and expertise. This is an incredibly important function but it is not criticism, which is targeted towards a knowledgeable audience, nor is it what is currently happening on the internet.

I can't really speak for anybody else, but from what I heard from my colleagues on the panel and around town, I think I speak for a considerable cohort of contemporary arts writers. The conditions that informed the creation of Culturebot are considerably different from the conditions that informed the birth of print media. First and foremost, Culturebot originated from within an arts organization. From the outset we rejected the false premise of opposition and separation that undergirds traditional arts journalism. This is a false premise, because many writers from Big Journalism have close relationships with artists. They are constantly negotiating a very difficult line, but certainly there are controversial artists (or artists of dubious merit) who benefit from close friendships with reviewers.

Culturebot was, by definition, embedded. Our role was not to criticize from the outside, but to explicate an often opaque process, history & framework. We took as our mission a collegial relationship with artists, administrators and makers of all kinds, an obligation to make visible the workings of a hermetic world. We are not fundamentally in the business of advising consumers, we are in the business of engaging community and building informed audiences, empowering ("emancipating" [PDF, 4.5MB], even) citizens to engage with performance work from a place of knowledge and autonomy, not consumerist passivity. We believe this approach is concomitant with the artist's process and desired outcomes. (Not to belabor the point, but you can read about these ideas in depth here.)

It just seems strange and counter-productive for newspaper arts journalists to feel under attack. Yes, some web-based arts writers aspire to your job and all of us would love to have such a wide platform for what we write, but most of us see what we do as very, very different. We are not reviewers and we're not, particularly, "critics" in the traditional sense. We can be critical, it is not all lovey-dovey, nicey-nicey, but we are writing from within a community of art-makers, one where a writer might also be a curator or a maker or an administrator and where those roles can be changeable over time.

This situation, in the case of the dance world, leads to a discussion of the very different aesthetic propositions of contemporary dance vs. ballet, modern, jazz, etc. I'm on the BESSIES Committee and we have spent a LOT of time discussing this, at least on my subcommittee.. The new BESSIES strives to be inclusive of all dance forms, suggesting an equivalency between classical, modern, contemporary and culturally-specific genres of the form. In some ways this is laudable, in others this is deeply problematic. And this manifests most clearly when it comes to writing about dance.

For instance, The Koch Brothers are huge supporters of ballet. Regardless of your feelings about the Koch Brothers' politics, this is a helpful demonstration of the

economic differences between ballet and contemporary dance. Ballet is a well-funded (relatively speaking), classical form. Its modes of construction, production and distribution are not considerably different from those of Broadway, Opera or other large scale forms. It is not, usually, a collaborative proposition and Ballet dancers are not, usually, generative artists during the development process. There are very clear guidelines about what is "good" vs. what is "bad". Whether you agree with these values or not, dancers are supposed to look a certain way (according to people more knowledgeable than myself), with certain lines, height, stature, bearing, etc. (apparently Wendy Whelan is misshapen and therefore fair game for criticism). Modern, jazz, tap, etc. – these are forms with very clear guidelines and, generally, hew closer to the "entertainment" model of performing arts than contemporary work. And ballet is a more inherently presentational form. Ballet is rarely, if ever, presented in any other format than on a proscenium, with distance from the audience. Contemporary work exists frequently in intimate venues and in 360 degrees. This difference is important.

So while the experience of attending these forms is somewhat similar (buy a ticket, take a seat, it lasts for a set amount of time, etc.) the aesthetic propositions are different and what is expected of an "audience" member are different. Same with "theater" – if you buy a ticket to Book Of Mormon, the outward experience is the same as attending a show at PS122 (buy a ticket, take a seat, it starts, it ends, go home) but the demand on the audience is different. Broadway, ballet, etc. – they just ask you to come and enjoy. Watch the show, listen to the music, go home and you're good. And this is a fine proposition. But it is different from going to PS122 or Danspace Project or The Kitchen. When one attends contemporary dance or performance it may be conventionally "entertaining" but the proposition is actually closer to what is, theoretically, attributable to visual art (see Gadamer). The time-based, body-based performance event asks the audience to do more than passively watch: to engage, to pay attention, to reflect, to think. The performance event is a prescribed durational experience located at a specific nexus of space, time and embodiment, a philosophical/aesthetic field of inquiry. Or, maybe, in other words, just plain "weird" – in the sense of "unnatural" or subverting our expectations of common experience. So when we write about this form of expression it would be misguided to bring the frameworks of ballet to the table except as a point of reference when appropriate. The questions that the choreographer and dancers are proposing are fundamentally different and rooted in different conditions of origin.

As the dance world (finally!) starts to deeply question its existing models and frameworks, the way we write about dance and the role of writing in relation to dance is going to change. Big Traditional Dance is, for most communities, unsustainable. I imagine that instances of Big Culture like symphonies, ballets, opera, etc. will be concentrated in 10 or so major markets that have sufficient civic and philanthropic infrastructures to support them. Secondary and tertiary markets will have access to Big Culture through HD broadcasts like what the Met in NYC and National Theatre in London do, and people will incorporate Big Culture into the tourist agenda. Reports suggest that the Met's HD broadcast program is already profitable and the ticket revenues they've lost from audiences who might have before traveled from Vermont or New Hampshire have been more than offset by local ticket sales.

As Big Culture fades in those markets, resources will be reallocated to create more scalable arts infrastructure (which I think we're already seeing with the NEA's ArtPlace initiative) on local levels. We'll see more small and mid-sized arts organizations supporting artists in different ways, we'll see more residencies and exchanges between arts groups from different cities and regions, we'll see the rise of a production system where artists from the Big Five cities will come to smaller cities to build work and support local artists, with the idea of touring and building a national collaborative network of cultural communities. We'll see more networked projects using the internet and telepresence. And we will see the rise of a new type of arts writing that reflects this new landscape. If that means Big Arts Journalism becomes less and less sustainable, so be it. Probably there will be a few coveted spots at a few major media outlets, the rest will be scaled to match the reality of the arts on the ground in communities. And I don't think that's a bad thing, because what we're ultimately talking about is transforming audiences from passive watchers to active engagers, transforming the role of the artist and transforming cultural centers into spaces for meaningful public engagement in civic life. Which is pretty darn good.

Re-Framing The Critic for the 21st Century: Dramaturgy, Advocacy and Engagement



INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of talk about criticism lately asking what it is, why is it important, what is the difference between "good" criticism and "bad" criticism and who gets to do it, anyway? This is understandable for many, many reasons, not least of which is that the general tone of discourse in our culture is at an extraordinary low while the need for thoughtful criticism is at an all-time high. We live in incredibly complicated times that require examination and circumspection. Yet things have devolved to the point that a political campaign can literally reject truth as a criteria for making allegations and a state political party platform can reject the teaching of values clarification and critical thinking skills in schools; ignorant pugnacity in the pursuit of extremism passes for discourse in the public realm and people communicate their approval through clicking a "like" button. At the same time the traditional hierarchies for determining the "legitimacy" of critics have begun to fail. At the risk of endlessly re-stating the obvious, the internet has changed everything and it has mostly demonstrated the truth of two time-honored sentiments:

> *Opinions are like pieholes, everyone has one.*

> *Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than open your mouth and remove all doubt.*

Yes, the internet has enabled many intelligent, thoughtful people to share their ideas and insights on countless things, but it has also created the very serious problem of having conversations regularly reduced to the least common denominator. For most of us this is now a fact of life that merely demands that we be more discerning in whose opinions we trust and more prudent about who we engage in conversation. For others, it seems to be an existential threat. Michael Kaiser, hysterically over-reacting to the emancipation of the great unwashed, ruffled feathers states in an essay on The Huffington Post:

> *…the growing influence of blogs, chat rooms and message boards devoted to the arts has given the local professional critic a slew of competitors...Many arts institutions even allow their audience members to write their own critiques on the organizational website. This is a scary trend.*

Suffice it to say that we here at Culturebot vehemently disagreed with him on several levels – one, the presumption that arts audiences are too ignorant and uninformed to have thoughtful opinions; two, that institutions should be opaque, resistant to change and indifferent to the opinions of their audiences; and three, that there is still such as thing as a "professional critic" in mainstream arts journalism. I am not going to completely re-hash our responses in this essay; you can read Jeremy's response

here and my response here. One key issue though is Kaiser's dismissal of "amateurs" and his outmoded and unrealistic attachment to the idea of a critic vetted and approved by the socially empowered arbiters of distinction, that approval being largely specious to begin with. As I say in my response, it is worth noting that "amateurs" in the 21st Century are frequently quite knowledgeable:

Are we amateurs? No. Kaiser's derogatory use of the term indicates a startling lack of respect for audience members and a lack of knowledge about the composition of that audience. He might be surprised to learn how many people in the audience actually know what they are talking about. Not everyone can afford to get a Master's in arts admin, criticism, dance, theater, etc. only to come into a job market where your best option is a $30K/year, 60hr/wk job in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Much less take time off from their life to study with Kaiser in the Kennedy Center Fellowship for Arts Management. Thus the established arts infrastructure tends to skew to people who are either willing to live penuriously or have other resources to draw on.

Even fewer people can make a living as an artist.

So the audience for the arts – and the people who are passionate enough to frequent cultural institutions, comment on their sites or start their own blogs – are frequently educated, knowledgeable, committed individuals who, you know, have actual jobs. They are artists and former artists, they are friends and families of artists, they are people who grew up or into an appreciation of the arts for any number of reasons but because of the necessities of making a living are relegated to "amateur" status. Sure there are some ill-informed writers and commenters out there, but as I've watched arts writing on the internet evolve over the past eight years I've been surprised by the quality of writing, the knowledge of the writers and the vitality of the discussion.

You can also read my account of a panel I participated in at the Dance Critics Association where I articulate the difference between reviewers and critics and the underlying assumptions of print vs. new media.

But on some level I owe Kaiser a debt of gratitude, because he compelled me to closely examine what we do at Culturebot, why we have always been different, why what we do is important and how we can do it better. This line of inquiry has been very fruitful, not only in defining and improving Culturebot's critical practice, but in opening up a deep conversation about the role of the critic, the nature of spectatorship (Ranciere, et al) and the transformative potential of the arts. Fortunately Jeremy has been keeping things going on the editorial front and been an invaluable sounding board, resource and collaborator as we tease out these questions looking for answers. Culturebot has been doing what we do for almost nine years and now we are finally explaining it. Over the past year we have published (and will continue to publish) a series of essays articulating the challenges and promises of the changing arts landscape. The essay you are currently reading will propose a new framework for the critic in this emerging landscape and a vision for how that role can facilitate change and innovation sector-wide.

WHAT IS A CRITIC?

Many people have taken on this question of late. Daniel Mendehlson's recent manifesto on The New Yorker blog, which I encourage you to read in its entirety, has some thoughtful insights. While we don't entirely agree with his positions, there are two in particular that resonate:

> *The serious critic ultimately loves his subject more than he loves his reader—a consideration that brings you to the question of what ought to be reviewed in the first place. When you write criticism about literature or any other subject, you're writing* for *literature or that subject, even more than you're writing for your reader: you're adding to the accumulated sum of things that have been said about your subject over the years. If the subject is an interesting one, that's a worthy project. Because the serious literary critic (or dance critic, or music critic) loves his subject above anything else, he will review, either negatively or positively, those works of literature or dance or music—high and low, rarefied and popular, celebrated and neglected—that he finds worthy of examination, analysis, and interpretation. To set interesting works before intelligent audiences does honor to the* subject*. If you only write about what you think people are interested in, you fail your subject*

> *—and fail your reader, too, who may in the end find himself happy to encounter something he wouldn't have chosen for himself.*

This is the heart of what we have always strived to do here, to identify those things that we find "worthy of examination, analysis, and interpretation" and "set interesting works before intelligent audiences". We are passionate about the work we cover and want to share it with intelligent, engaged audiences. We are not in the business of being a consumer advocate for Joe Ticketbuyer, we are facilitating discourse.

Secondly, Mendelsohn asserts:

The role of the critic, I repeat, is to mediate intelligently and stylishly between a work and its audience; to educate and edify in an engaging and, preferably, entertaining way.

I would add to this assertion by suggesting that the critic be deeply informed and widely accessible, which is something we strive to do here at Culturebot. This is probably where we part ways with Mendelsohn, in that I suspect he is suggesting, like Kaiser, that a "real" critic must receive the imprimatur of legitimacy from the appropriate cultural "authorities".

In contrast, Culturebot has been working to cultivate a critical voice that embraces subjectivity and the informality/intimacy of the internet – its humor, irreverence and informality – while acknowledging the need for intellectual rigor. Our critical endeavor is not about reviewing, it is not about what the writer did or didn't like – it is about information, examination and exegesis: creating context by connecting the work at hand to larger ideas, to historical and aesthetic precedents and to the world in which we live.

In a related essay in the New York Times entitled "A Critic's Case for Critics Who Are Actually Critical", Dwight Garner proposes:

> *Marx understood that criticism doesn't mean delivering petty, ill-tempered Simon Cowell-like put-downs. It doesn't necessarily mean heaping scorn. It means making fine distinctions. It means talking about ideas, aesthetics and morality as if these things matter (and they do). It's at base an act of love. Our critical faculties are what make us human.*

Interestingly, Garner uses the word "love" in a similar way to Mendelsohn. This may be a contentious idea (and the fact that it resonates with me may have more to do with my Jewishness than anything else) but criticism is an act of love. It means you care enough to devote time, energy and thought to really paying attention, to taking the work seriously, to asking questions and having a meaningful conversation that will, hopefully, support your audience in having a considered life; one in which ideas, aesthetics and morality matter, one where art is a forum for parsing the complexities of human experience and guiding us towards right action. Does this love of art or these qualities of personality require the imprimatur of a cultural hierarchy to be realized in the public sphere? Because in a very real sense the critic is a public intellectual, someone who is passionately devoted to a life of the mind as a means for deepening lived experience generally, serving as an expositor and mediator between the artistic endeavor and the audience. More on this later.

CRITICISM IN THE 21st CENTURY

The first step toward re-framing the critic in the 21st century is to abandon the reviewer-based model of criticism predicated on traditional consumer print media. I am not going to completely re-state Culturebot's concept of critical horizontalism here. For a fuller explanation please read this essay. In brief what I am advocating is the following:

> *Culturebot proposes a new framework for arts criticism that we refer to as "critical horizontalism". In this framework criticism is a creative practice unto itself and the writer exists in subjective relation to the work of the artist. The writer's response is the continuation of a dialogue initiated by the artist. If this response is then published on the Internet, this creates a horizontal field of discourse with the work. This model resists the commodification of*

> *the performing arts as "entertainment" but rather situates it as time-based art. The performance itself is an ephemeral nexus where audience, artist and ideas converge. The critic supports the continued investigation of the art event across multiple platforms.*

The practical implementation of this is expressed in the idea of "embedded criticism", something we recently explored in our Exit Art project and a term that has been used more frequently of late. (Andrew Haydon discusses it thoughtfully here.) Embedded Criticism further removes the writer from the traditional arts journalism model by encouraging the writer to engage with the artist's process over time in the dual role of dramaturg and expositor. In this arrangement a writer is attached to a given project and works internally as dramaturg and sounding board throughout the life cycle of the project. At the same time the writer is responsible for writing about and documenting the process in a public-facing way on the Internet and through "horizontal" audience engagement strategies. Alternately a writer may be embedded in a presenting institution and serve this function with multiple artists over the course of a season. In fact, our advocacy of this methodology has its origins in Culturebot's initial iteration as in-house blog of Performance Space 122 where we worked closely with artists throughout their creative process, sharing that with audiences and colleagues alike to enhance outreach and community engagement.

This notion of embedded criticism is not entirely new, of course. I haven't read the collected essays in Doug Borwick's book Building Communities, Not Audiences, I would assume that this idea is represented in there somewhere. The idea of an organizational critic-in-residence has been prototyped at the Cleveland Orchestra, though from here it looks like this is more of a gussied-up marketing tactic than actual dramaturgy or criticism, and I haven't found any reporting on the success or outcome of the initiative. Danspace Project currently has a scholar-in-residence, Jenn Joy. In conversation with my old friend and colleague Gwydion Suilebhan, I learned that the theater folks in Washington, D.C. have started to use the term "auditurgy" to describe "The process of providing theatre audiences with context regarding a theatrical piece prior to seeing the show without spoilers", which is probably a little closer to what Culturebot is proposing. The key distinction is in the particulars of implementation, which I will more fully articulate in a later section of this essay.

Culturebot's conception of the embedded critic also implies a re-positioning and re-imagining of the performing arts "presenting" institution in the culture at large, layering the ideas of Harold Skramstad's seminal 1999 essay "An Agenda for American Museums In the 21st Century" onto performing arts institutions. Skramstad asserts:

> *The great age of collection building in museums is over. Now is the time for the next great agenda of museum development in America. This agenda needs to take as its mission nothing less than to engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives. We have many practical institutions to help us work through our day-to-day problems. We have enough educational institutions that focus on training us to master the skills we need to graduate from school and get a job. Yet we have too few institutions that have as their goal to inspire and change us. American museums need to take this up as their new challenge. Up to now much of their time has been devoted to building their collections and sharing them through to the larger world. Now they must help us create the new world of in-reach in which people, young and old alike, can reach in to museums though experiences that will help give value and meaning to their own lives and at the same time stretch and enlarge their perceptions of the world.*

Culturebot's primary field of interest is contemporary performance and as such the notion of an embedded critic seems more viable in that context. Institutions that support contemporary performance, whether tending towards theater, dance, "live art" or the undefinable, tend to embrace a more investigative approach to the

commissioning, development and presentation of work than institutions dedicated to more traditional modes of producing and presenting existing repertory from the canon. One hopes that this idea of embedded criticism will gain traction throughout the performing arts sector, but it seems most likely to thrive, initially, amongst contemporary arts centers and festivals.

Another component of this re-framing is perhaps a bit more esoteric but, in my reading, nonetheless essential. In an earlier essay available here, I discuss the different aesthetic propositions of different kinds of performance. In brief, I assert that the nature of engagement and attention demanded of the audience by contemporary performance is fundamentally different from that of other kinds of more entertainment-oriented performance. This is important because in this context, as has been asserted elsewhere, the audience's engagement with the performance begins as soon as they hear about it and continues until they no longer think about it. This is a belief that I have long held and continue to have re-affirmed, most recently through the final performances of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Park Avenue Armory. I was profoundly moved by way the ensemble subtly entered the space, performed with grace and transcendence and then undramatically concluded, leaving the space with a quiet, understated humility. It was not an ending, it was a caesura. To me the unified aesthetic experience of the entire production reinforced the notion that the dance is always there. For a specific moment in space/time the performers, the audience and the artist's ideas come together, we focus our collective attention to make the work manifest, and then it vanishes back into the ether. But it is never really gone, it is just disembodied and abstract, living in memory and mind, waiting to reappear.

So let's start there: the actual performance is only a blip (an important blip, but merely a moment nonetheless) on a much larger creative arc of investigation. Let's re-imagine the performing arts institution as an "engager", not merely a "presenter" and let's re-frame the critic within the institution or within the artist's creative process rather than on the outside passing judgement. In this new world, what does this new critic actually do?

ON BEING A 21ST CENTURY CRITIC

Building on Mendelsohn's idea of the critic as mediator between artist and audience and Culturebot's framework of "critical horizontalism" as outlined above, we propose that the contemporary critic expand their text-based responsive practice to include three new functions:

Dramaturgy

Advocacy

Engagement

These functions, taken together, form the foundational work of the 21st Century Critic. So what do these terms mean and what is the work?

Dramaturgy

Here when we speak of dramaturgy we are referring to a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship between differently-tasked generative artists. The dramaturge is an intellectual and aesthetic companion engaging in constructive inquiry and investigation alongside the director, choreographer, designers and performers. At the same time the critic/dramaturge is a scribe and documentarian. In the digital age this means assembling video and audio documentation of the process as well as generating text-based analysis and exegesis. The critic/dramaturge may assemble a bibliography as well and ALL of this material, thoughtfully edited and arranged, can be shared on the internet. More on that later.

It is incumbent on aspiring critics to reassess the practice of dramaturgy in the Information Age. The way we relate to information has been profoundly changed by the internet, both practically and aesthetically. Google was invented in no small part due to a desire by its founders to invert and innovate the traditional system of citation in academic research. For that matter, anyone who has been involved in web design has had to learn how to create Information Architecture documents. Website are built using something called "the document object model" that is far too complicated to go into here but basically is a way of assembling information (code, content, scripts, data) from multiple sources in one place.These are new ways of approaching, analyzing and structuring the relationships between information and how we engage with it. The web has revolutionized experience design and user interfaces and is more and more reframing our experience of narrative.

At the same time it is casting doubt on the efficacy of text as a means of transmitting information – is text archaic? What playwright hasn't watched a wretched production of their work and been frustrated by the limitations of text to convey their vision? If text is a medium to convey emotions and abstract thought, if it serves as evidence of experience, then is it not subject to the inaccuracies of translation both between languages and the slippage from page to stage as translated through actors/directors? Not to mention the semiotic slippage of meaning as words change through time. Is text the most effective use of notation for movement-based and body-based performances and how do we now reassess the ideas of ownership, authorship and intellectual property? (vis a vis Factory 449's appropriation of Temporary Distortion's work, Beyonce's alleged appropriation of Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Sarah Michelson's alleged use of Twyla Tharp's choreography in Devotion).

Dramaturgy in the Information Age demands a broader reach and more expansive skill set than ever before, and a willingness to exploit the tools and terms of our time to re-assess the contexts, meanings and implications of performance. The critic/dramaturge cannot merely be a historian or fact-checker but must be an innovator of forms of intellectual inquiry. S/he must be engaged in thoughtful conversation around the nature of performance and the multiple valences given to words, actions and embodied presence. This dramaturgical function must make use of all available tools and strategies to identify important questions, assemble information and present it both to the artist and the engaged observer.

Advocacy

Advocacy is here meant to imply the expository function of the embedded critic, serving as mediator between artist and audience during the developmental process or, if institutionally embedded, throughout a season, prior and subsequent to the performance. Advocacy means disseminating the ideas and investigations, identifying people, texts and other relevant sources outside the work and sharing them with potential audience members to engender dialogue and promote conversations.

Too often this function is left to the artists themselves or to marketing departments that don't have the expertise, experience or resources to successfully implement these initiatives. Unfortunately most institutions are still deeply invested in a commodity-based communications strategy predicated on an "entertainment" model of presentation. While there is certainly a role for that in the culture at large (just as there is a role for consumer-oriented reviewers in popular general interest publications), the task of the 21st Century Performing Arts Presenter is to move away from commodity-based models of entertainment marketing and to explore ongoing deep engagement.

At this point I would like to re-emphasize the importance of the critical voice. As mentioned previously, since the beginning Culturebot has consciously worked to cultivate a critical voice that embraces the subjectivity and informality of the internet while aspiring to a level of intellectual rigor. That being said, we do not aspire to be academics. The function of the 21st Century Critic is not only to mediate between artist and audience but between academic and audience as well. At the moment the bulk of thoughtful writing about contemporary performance happens in academic settings or esoteric industry publications. It is frequently jargon-laden and obscure, alienating all but the most deeply invested of audience members. Theory, of course, is a vital and essential component of a healthy arts ecosystem, but the biggest challenge facing contemporary performance today is not a lack of people with Masters degrees and Doctorates exploring theory but rather a perceived lack of relevance and a noticeable lack of audience. The Performing Arts in America generally are suffering from audience attrition and the perception of irrelevance due, in no small part, to wider cultural assumptions around what the performing arts are and who they are for. We are now presented with the extraordinary opportunity to look deeply into the origins and potential of live performance, revisit our assumptions about spectatorship and rebuild the arts institution.

As part of this re-building and re-imagining the Embedded Critic fulfills an Advocacy function as the first step towards engagement. S/he will use the internet, social media and other tools to build knowledge and awareness of the work of the institution, the contexts and ideas of the artists and support transparency, porousness and connection. Marketing still has its place, but it is a diminished role as we shift our emphasis from trying to "sell a ticket to a show" to offering our communities a space to observe or participate in transformative experiences and engage with each other. In a sense we are metaphorically and literally re-building civic space and public life – but more on this later.

Engagement

If Advocacy is the "information distribution" function of the 21st Century Critic, then Engagement is the social function. The Engagement function puts the idea of critical horizontalism into practice with ancillary, contextual public programs designed to transform audiences into communities by bringing artist, critic and audience together for non-hierarchical discourse, subverting and innovating traditional models of artist talk backs and panel discussions.

Culturebot started exploring this in earnest last year, after our conversation series at Under The Radar. We received a lot of positive feedback from the conversations but also some very thoughtful responses including the fact that the presentational aesthetics of the panel form itself reinforce hierarchical structures we sought to break down. Thus we started researching alternate forms. We had prior experience with Lois Weaver's "The Long Table" project and Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology as non-hierarchical organizational techniques and started to read more deeply into the origins and applications of those processes. We were directed to the European art/research collective Everybodys who have created an open source toolbox for creative innovation and intervention. At the same time we continued to assimilate into our critical practice the work of multiple theorists on performance and spectatorship ranging from Spangberg to Ranciere to Bishop, Jackson and Foster. We did our first experiments with engagement as creative critical practice at the invitation of Ron Berry for the Fusebox Festival in 2012. It was very successful (and very fun) – there is a write-up here.

Our vision of the embedded critic's engagement function is to develop and implement these ancillary, contextual public programs. They can be tailored to a specific project or specific institution, they can be scalable frameworks, they can be performative, conversational, interactive, mediated – the possibilities are endless. The only caveat is that they provide points of access and engagement for "audiences" and that they eschew the traditional hierarchies of the presenting model. This is challenging because, as noted in the introductory section of this essay, democracy is messy and so is horizontalism. The internet has reinforced our cultural tendency to allow conversations to be reduced to the least common denominator. The critic/dramaturge and dare I say "public intellectual" of the 21st Century will not only be responsible for passing judgement (more on that in the next section) but also for fostering discussion. It will be necessary to develop new techniques and propositions that will encourage rigorous, informed discourse while attempting to resist the impulse (and efforts of others) to allow these conversations to devolve. Culturebot will be exploring these ideas and working to develop these strategies moving onward in various cities and venues, including a "performance" in March 2013 at On The Boards in Seattle, WA. We hope you'll join us and if you have ideas or strategies you know of or are developing, please share them with us!

ON "CRITICAL" CRITICISM

Let's not forget that the word critic comes from the Greek word for "judge". It would be foolhardy to abandon the traditional model of criticism in sole favor of the embedded model or to neuter the critic, stripping him/her of the ability to pass judgement.

Our idea is that the critic will serve a dual function, as embedded in certain projects and institutions and external with others. Ideally these functions would be expressed through a text-based practice and then co-exist in juxtaposition, aggregated on the web. Audiences and artists can then develop an understanding of the critic's predilections and biases over time, and evaluate his/her judgements – either negative or positive – based on knowledge of the critic's history.

Our experience at Culturebot has been that artists are remarkably resilient when confronted with thoughtful criticism, even when it is negative. We are committed to following artists over long spans of time and thus when we are offering negative commentary it is not in isolation but as part of a longer arc of investigation. While there is a place for heated, passionate, even occasionally vitriolic debate over a given artist, their work or an institution's policies and choices, there is less of a place for the short-term gain of snarky reviewing and snide asides. If someone, for some reason, invokes a critic's ire, the critic is responsible for articulating their anger in a meaningful way, not giving in to the impulse to make ad hominem personal attacks.

In this sense the 21st Century Critical model acknowledges that even the "external" critic is embedded in the arts ecology. While reviewers in mainstream newspapers such as the New York Times still attempt to maintain the illusion of objectivity, we know that in fact most reviewers have numerous and complicated relationships with the artists about whom they write. They socialize with them, network professionally

and frequently run in the same circles. Embedded Criticism rejects the illusion of objectivity (and the specious hierarchical inference of power created by the myth of objectivity) and demands that a critic acknowledge their subjectivity and prejudices, be transparent about their relationships. Critics must be called to account for and to justify their opinions and actions as much as artists and institutions must be held responsible for theirs.

In this way we are not so much abandoning the ability of the critic to be deeply critical, negative or even dismissive. We are merely altering the frame so that the critic's opinion is not perceived to descend from some imagined realm of Platonic objectivity "on high", but rather from a subjective experience predicated on real human biases – and that this subjective experience is, necessarily, deeply embedded in the artistic ecosystem and should be treated as such.

ON CRITICISM, ART AND CULTURE

From our vantage point, it seems that the age of ubiquitous big cultural institutions in America is winding down. Post-war prosperity, optimism and a sense of social mobility and civic engagement led to a boom that people thought would last forever. Every city would have a symphony, an opera, a ballet and several museums, each accessible to all. Tyrone Guthrie dreamed of a truly regional theater system where regional theaters would create and produce professional plays by, from and about their community. Those days are gone; many cities no longer have the tax base or philanthropic infrastructure to support symphonies, operas and ballets, museums have already begun a process of re-imagination and regional theater takes its repertoire from New York writers, casts from NYC and LA, maybe Chicago, and replicates the same mostly-pallid fare nationwide.

In the wake of this enormous transition in America's cultural life it is understandable that so many arts professionals and concerned constituents are bemoaning the current state of the arts – lack of funding, dwindling attendance, a perceived lack of relevance. No doubt it is a difficult time, but it is also a moment of extraordinary possibility. Many foundations, regional and local arts organizations are working progressively and aggressively to adapt to the financial and social realities we face. And while it is fashionable in some circles to denigrate the NEA, if we really look at it Rocco Landesman has assembled an extraordinary team of innovative people to reassess the NEA's programs and develop new ones. initiatives like ArtPlace, based on the thinking of the Urban Institute's Maria Rosario Jackson, the NEA/Knight Arts Journalism Challenge and others indicate that the NEA is thinking strategically about the future and trying to create a new ecosystem that is responsive to the financial and cultural realities on the ground. We may not always agree on what the NEA and other funders support, but we can agree that most of the time they're working with vision to re-imagine the arts and its role in society, even within an infrastructure that may not readily support change. At the same time artist service organizations and artists themselves are working passionately too, bringing new ideas to the table.

Culturebot grew out of a small arts organization and I personally have spent the 20-some odd years of my career in the arts – first as an artist, now as an administrator – in the world of independent, small and mid-sized arts organizations. That is my passion and while I wholly support the idea of maintaining big institutions and admire their capacity to undertake projects of incredible scale, I think that real change starts on a smaller level, that real impact happens when the art is closer to the audience, when the audience is closer to the institution and the institution is closer to the community. That's when lives are changed, that's when kids get the bug that transforms them into lifelong arts people.

As I noted in the introduction it seems to me that we are at a point in American culture where the loudest, angriest, least-informed voices often win out over thoughtful consideration, moderation and circumspection. I fear that we live in a time when pugnacity wins out over conciliation, aggression over collaboration and short-term greed triumphs over the long-term common good. As someone who values the examined life, who believes in the social contract and the notion that intelligent people can disagree without becoming homicidal, xenophobic, partisans, I have dedicated a great deal of my time and energy to the idea that the arts – particularly the performing arts – provide a space to foster reflection, education and communication. I would never suggest that any artist has a moral or political imperative to adhere to any socially-engaged justification for their work. Artists make art for whatever reason calls them forward. But the overall ecology of the arts, the "culture" sector, exists within a larger framework of Culture; it exists as a laboratory and an "auditorium" – place for people to be heard. The cultural sector exists as a place to engage with the ideas that shape our experiences of the world, to try and bridge the almost unfathomable gap between interiorities by making our inner lives

manifest in the material world. Making art – visual, theater, dance, music, writing, new media, etc. – is the process of articulating our subjective experience in a way that can be shared with others, it is an attempt to bridge the gap of our existential isolation and come together as individuals and in community. At its best, art creates a matrix for the intentional intersection of subjectivities, particularly when watching performance, in which a third entity consisting of the combined intelligences of audience and performer comes into being and, for a moment, we transcend the limitations of everyday experience.

I say this at the risk of undermining the credibility of everything I've written thus far with the appearance of vaguely metaphysical speculation, but I believe passionately in the role culture (with a small "c") plays in affecting the tone and composition of Culture (with a capital "C"). My experience suggests that there is something larger at work, with competing impulses towards creation and destruction. Thus, whether in the abstract or with a specific social agenda, the arts ecosystem supports the creative impulse in ourselves and in our communities. It can support the tendency towards progress rather than regression and it must be nurtured. It is not entertainment and it is not commodity, it is a vital social function that supports civil society and human development.

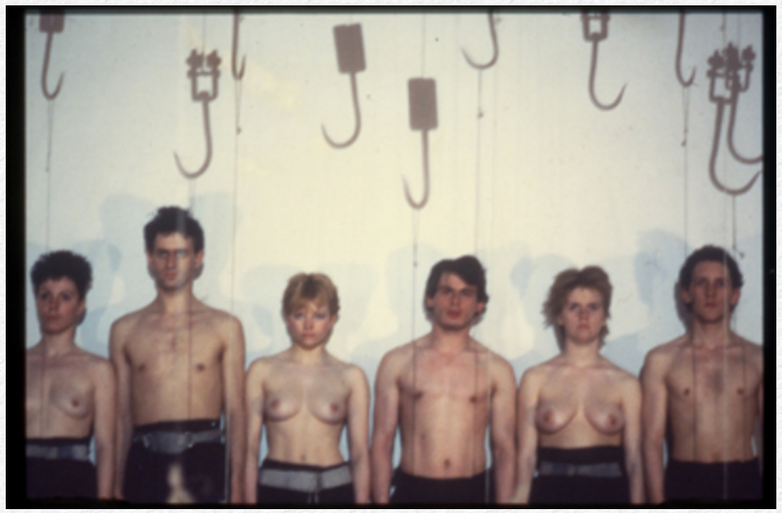
In order to fully realize the potential of the arts in our culture, we need people dedicated to building bridges. I imagine that person as a new type of critic, re-framed for the 21st Century: the critic as dramaturge, advocate and engager, the critic as public intellectual. I imagine the new critic as an insightful commentator and expositor, a facilitator of public discourse mediating between artist, audience, institution and academics, working to build a sustainable, responsible, transparent arts ecosystem that will sustain itself – and our culture – into the future.

The Economics of Ephemerality

2

Visual Art Performance vs. Contemporary Performance // On Social Practice and Performance // Some Thoughts on Attention, Language and Demand // Panel As Performance: Deconstructing The Performa Event // On Curatorial Practice and Cultural Production // THE ECONOMICS OF EPHEMERALITY // Panel As Performance: The Danspace Conversations on Some Sweet Day // Shana Moulton, I'm Sorry (and other important things) // Complicating Theaster Gates // ACTIONS! and Other Art Worker Tales

Visual Art Performance vs. Contemporary Performance



With Performa having recently concluded and in the wake of the Marina Abramovic kerfuffle at the MOCA gala, I have been giving a lot of thought to the difference between visual art performance and contemporary performance – more specifically, Time-Based Art with its origins in dance and theater. This is an ongoing obsession of mine and one that I feel needs to be addressed critically. Thanks largely to RoseLee Goldberg, who literally wrote the book on performance art, the visual arts world has "rediscovered" performance in an unprecedented way. Unlike RoseLee, it seems that many of the visual arts curators currently working to promote visual arts performance lack knowledge in contemporary performance, and I think this presents a problem, as well as a challenge.

At the moment, Independent Curators International is offering a workshop on Curating Performance that features a group of teacher/advisors drawn entirely from the visual arts world who don't appear to have backgrounds in contemporary performance. I find it surprising that ICI couldn't find – or weren't interested in finding – a single representative of the contemporary performance sector. And then I started thinking about who they could have approached and I realized that the number of performance curators who can speak eloquently and thoughtfully about why they program what they do is few and far between. Most of the curators I know are reluctant to speak about their criteria and aesthetic frameworks. I imagine this is one reason why the Institute For Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan was created. I have reached out to both ICI and ICPP for syllabi and reading lists to compare/contrast. If and when I receive those materials, I will write an addendum to this post. For now, rather than focus on the different curatorial perspectives I would like to share some of my subjective responses and thoughts related to the difference between visual art performance and contemporary performance.

In the past two weeks I have had several substantial discussions about this topic, two of which stick out for me. The first conversation was with one of New York's most esteemed artistic director/curators and the other with a prominent director whose work has spanned both avant-garde performance and mainstream theater. From the artistic director I was told, "The visual arts world hates craft, they're seeking 'authenticity'", suggesting that when a visual artist stages a performative event it should not have any degree of artifice, that it should be perceived as "real".

The director I spoke to said that the visual arts world, somewhat understandably, finds theater laughable and as a result rarely studies it. While I share the visual arts world's distaste for popular theater predicated on "psychological realism", I lament the fact that there are many, many devoted practitioners of contemporary performance who are as dramaturgically engaged in the construction of their time-based work as visual artists are in creating the intellectual framework around their object-based work, and that this is, apparently, not recognized or valued by the visual arts world. It is as if when visual artists and curators "discover performance" they think that they are the first to ever encounter the aesthetic issues it proposes. It would seem that they are frequently unaware of – or indifferent to – the fact that there is a long history of performance theory; that theater, and especially dance, have for many years explored issues around presence, embodiment, presentational aesthetics, the observed/observer relationship, the visual presentation of the constructed environment, the semiotics of representation, etc., etc. The visual art world might be surprised to read Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal writing on post-dramatic theater. They might be surprised to be exposed to the work of Rich Maxwell, Philippe Quesne, Cuqui Jerez, Xavier LeRoy and others who work extremely hard to create rigorous stagings of "the real" – who use artifice to create an experience of the real that is almost indistinguishable from the "real thing". Or the

work of Annie Dorsen who, in using computer programs and simulations, completely undermines the notion of "the real" itself.

I don't know a lot about visual arts curatorial practice, but I have seen my fair share of both visual art performance and contemporary performance and the lack of meaningful dialogue between the two practices is troubling.

While Performa has taken the long view on visual art performance, tracing its development over the past 100 years or so, I think that when most people talk about performance art from a visual arts perspective they are referring to work that traces its precedents to the 50s through the 80s, after which performance art fell more or less out of fashion. This may be ascribed (I'm just winging it here, but its a theory) to the rise of solo performance from a performance background – Karen Finley, et al. – being labeled Performance Art and a desire by the visual art world to distance itself from that aesthetic.

There's a revealing interview with Roselee Golberg in which she says: "First, I think that artists who've never worked with performance before, they really almost don't know where to begin" and then:

> *They haven't dealt with things like performance rehearsals, they haven't dealt with things like auditions, they haven't dealt with things like lighting.…Then there's the next layer of questions I ask, where I'm really the guinea pig, I'm the audience member. If I'm going to walk into this room, what is it going to feel like when I walk in? What is the room going to look like? Is there going to be sound right away? What kind of feeling do you want people to have? I spent all these years thinking about performance, looking for all these things that did work or didn't work, and I feel like that's my role sometimes, to be critical.*

Earlier in the same interview she says:

> *I think what Performa did was suddenly say, let's dream up another kind of artist performance, and let's give visual artists who maybe have never made this kind of work before a chance to create something extraordinary that is the equivalent of beautiful work that we are seeing in galleries and museums, and not backwards-looking material that seems to be getting further and further in the corner in a way and being very much about '70s and '80s and so on.*

The basic idea of artists creating performance that is equivalent to the work in galleries or museums is a compelling proposition. But at the same time it suggests that only those artists identified as visual artists who are entering – naively and lacking practical knowledge and historical background – into the world of performance are going to be making that work. It largely ignores the significant body of work being created by time-based artists for whom performance is their primary discipline and does nothing to raise the value and perception of that work. To me this is problematic.

Ideally I would love to see Performa acknowledge even more work by time-based artists – directors, choreographers, ensembles – who are creating, on a regular basis, contemporary performance. That seems unlikely, in which case I would like to see the world of Contemporary Performance engage in parallel strategies to those of Performa and work harder to elevate the valuation and perception of staged or site-based performance work. Rather than the chaotic mishmash of APAP season festivals, I can imagine a new festival that ties together the most forward-focused work from UTR, Coil and American Realness under one umbrella with thoughtful dramaturgy and academic panels.

So what are some of the differences between Visual Art Performance and Contemporary Performance?

First I would suggest the notion of context and infrastructure. Visual Art, historically, is about the creation of objects – paintings, sculptures, photographs – that can be sold. One impulse behind Visual Art Performance was the rejection of making objects

for sale in favor of creating non-commodifiable, ephemeral events that were meant to critique and undermine the capitalist structures of the art market. Some artists, like Marina Abramovic, have managed to commodify that work in retrospect, completely abandoning any pretense of anti-capitalism, in fact becoming major players in it. (Cue the MOCA Gala kerfuffle).

Since Visual Art has historically been about the creation of objects for sale, there is a massive infrastructure in place to create value around objects – museums, galleries, academics, journals, etc. Artists create with an accompanying intellectual framework and put their art into the marketplace where it is contextualized by critics, academics and curators. This helps create perceived value. If it gets into a museum show, it raises the value. If the artist works assiduously to hone their public image and awareness of their "brand", the value continues to rise. Objects that were created, essentially, without value beyond the cost of materials, become more prized due to scarcity and a sort of symbolic connection to a larger cultural framework. This art object is then bought and resold over time, with the hope that it will continue to rise in value. Artists rarely share in the resale revenues of work that has significantly appreciated in value, but that's another story. The Visual Art marketplace is, in a way, as pure an expression of capitalism as one could imagine. The irony of the art world's frequent embrace of leftist anti-capitalist ideology is not lost on me.

The recent rediscovery of performance by the Visual Art world could be viewed, cynically, as the latest fashion in a milieu that mostly values the new and the "edgy". Tino Sehgal is a laughable choreographer, but he's a brilliant businessman. And the art world, to be frank, is somewhat masochistic. They love nothing more than someone who can fuck with them in a novel and ingenious way. The fact that Sehgal has monetized abstraction and ephemerality is a stroke of genius. He has taken advantage of the thrill-seeking impulse of the hyper-capitalist art market and managed, like a financial services whiz, to turn the mere idea of a performance into money. Brilliant.

I propose that when most visual artists come to performance, they are still thinking within the framework of object-making. They may be engaging with concepts around experience and representation, but from a perspective of bringing visual art to life in the time-based world using the techniques and tropes with which they are already familiar. They may not be concerned with the study of movement and embodied presence, of the craft of performance or the challenges of the created environment. In contrast, Contemporary Performance as a genre has its roots in theater and dance. Experimental, to be sure, but rooted in explorations that are primarily focused on the performative event itself.

I'm no fan of traditional theater. That's my background, but I long ago tired of the limitations of psychological realism and conventional narrative. I can see why people from a visual arts background might find it less than compelling. But the world of Contemporary Performance has long since distanced itself from "drama" and practitioners of contemporary performance should be acknowledged for the work they do. Dancers and choreographers train for years, and continue to train every day, to master their bodies, enabling themselves to do extraordinary things. They deeply explore the nature of movement, the way bodies moving in space convey different meanings and experiences, point to different ideas. Directors work with dramaturges to develop intellectual frameworks around the experiences they create, around how to integrate the visual and auditory experience with the performance, how does all this point to ideas beyond the performed event? How does the physical representation of ideas on a stage or at a site loop back to the concepts with which they are engaged?

One difference, I think, is that time-based artists working in contemporary performance frequently think about, as Goldberg puts it, "What kind of feeling do you want people to have?" – something that is new to visual arts practitioners. This may seem like a mild distinction, but it is key. Performance practitioners are experience-makers, not object-makers, and as such they are concerned with human engagement. Directors, choreographers and other performance-makers may be engaging with making manifest the inner life of human beings, defining the space between audience and performance as a shared field of intersecting subjectivities. And this means that we're not only talking about thoughtful, detached examination of intellectual ideas but, sometimes, feelings. This is where it gets tricky because what makes Traditional Theater so abhorrent to many is the unseemly focus on feelings and emotion. I'll admit, I think there is nothing more awful than having to sit in a theater and watch some actor "act" the words of a playwright who is blatantly and unsubtly trying to evince an emotional response from the audience. In this day and age the provocation of an emotional response that doesn't feel obvious or unearned

is exceedingly difficult, and artists who are able to do this effectively are few and far between.

That being said, if a visual artist is making work in the context of creating objects for sale, it does not seem like a stretch to suggest that the framework of objectification will translate into the practice of visual art performance. In the visual art context, the body is an object to be manipulated like any other, or it is a canvas upon which the artist can project their desired meaning. If that body becomes more than object, it complicates the essential aesthetic transaction of the visual art experience. The attribution of feelings and emotions to a human being creates the possibility of empathy, moving the body from a field of abstraction into one of subjectivity. [Note: while discussing this essay with a friend of mine I was directed to the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and his study of hermeneutical aesthetics. I am only starting to research it, but it is brilliant, fascinating and relevant].

The Abramovic installation at the MOCA Gala appears to have been, based on after-the-fact accounts, objectification taken to its extreme, with human beings serving as literal centerpieces at the dining tables of the wealthy and privileged. From what I understand from performers' accounts online some were subjected to mockery and ridicule – for instance, a pile of salt arranged like a line of coke in front of the immobile performer – and generally put in an unenviable position. I'm sure that some of the performers had a very different experience, and only those who were in attendance can speak authoritatively, but from my perspective the premise itself borders on disgusting while being emblematic of the values of a hyper-capitalist art market.

So in brief – I am proposing that visual art performance, generally, is predicated on the objectification and abstraction of the human body, whereas contemporary performance – Time-Based Art with its origins in dance and theater – is more frequently predicated on the creation of a subjective field of experience – what I will call "experience design". The aesthetic challenges of integrating light, sound, visual representation and embodied presence – sometimes even text – into a Gesamtkunstwerk are undertaken not to create a "living object" but to create a shared experience.

So while both visual art and performance contexts rely on the vision of an artist, the path to the desired end result is different. The visual artist comes from an object-making context and approaches their work under that influence, whether by embracing or rejecting that paradigm. Contemporary performance, more often than not, actively acknowledges and celebrates the essential ephemerality of the form. The artwork exists only in the moment in which it is perceived, the audience has a role in the creation of the work itself, each performance and expression is unique depending on who is there to experience it. No two performance events are ever alike – and that is part of the beauty of it. Contemporary Performance events are rarely thought of as objects for sale, or as advancing an artist's ability to create objects-for-sale. Maybe that should change – that's a longer discussion for another time.

I will also propose that the practice of art-making in visual art performance versus contemporary performance is reflective of the object vs. experience framework. Performance, even from the most dictatorial choreographer or theater maker, is essentially a collaborative process. In order to bring a performance to life one requires the collaboration of directors, writers, composers, dramaturges, actors, lighting designers, set designers, technicians, programmers, videographers, choreographers, dancers, etc., etc. Visual art making is less frequently like that. Traditional visual arts practice is that of an artist alone in the studio or a master artist overseeing poorly paid laborers hired to fabricate objects under their direction. This method, I surmise, translates into visual art performance, where the same practices hold. Rather than collaboration, there are workers engaged to implement the singular, exacting vision of the artist. So we see a fundamental divide in both the practice of art making and in the theoretical constructs surrounding the creation of any given work. Yes, there are artists working in spectacle-oriented performance – Robert Wilson, for example – who are notoriously dictatorial and exacting. Never having been privy to Wilson's practice I can't say how collaborative he may or may not be. But I would imagine that even he must work responsively to the input of his co-creators.

Obviously this is a vast generalization. There are visual artists working with food experiences, community-engaged practices, etc. who defy the framework I'm suggesting. My concern is that for those visual artists engaged specifically in the making of "performance", the disdain for craft and the disinterest in artists already working in contemporary performance not only results in subpar work being

celebrated by the arts market and visual arts infrastructure, but continues the ongoing devaluation of contemporary performance from dance and theater makers.

This is a complicated issue – one which is far too much to fully engage here. Kaprow-style "happenings", Chris Burden being shot, etc. are experiments in "the real" that become more problematic when "re-performed". Nina Horisaki-Christens explores this idea in a recent essay in the ICI Journal where she discusses the Visual Art world's discomfort with "script". She says:

> *In his recent musings in* Artforum *on the future of Trisha Brown's work, Douglas Crimp posits that her signature solo* Watermotor*, as performed by Brown, is a masterpiece. He then follows up by inquiring, "Will it ever be danceable by anyone but Brown?" The question is not so much will it be danced by anyone else, as Crimp was likely aware that it would inevitably be performed by another at some point, but would it be danced as expressively and imaginatively by anyone else other than its maker. In Performance Art this seems to be the crux of the question of authenticity: can the work reach its full potential, retain its essential meaning and character, when performed in a different context or by a different individual?*

It is such an interesting – and flawed – paradox. I saw Watermotor performed by Neal Beasley last spring at DTW (now NYLA). It was beautiful and extraordinary. Was it the same as watching Trisha Brown do it herself? Probably not. Does it make it any less authentic? Not in the least. Here is Deborah Jowitt on Beasley in Watermotor:

> *In 1978, with* Watermotor*, Brown unloosed the inborn wildness that her earlier plain-jane structures had been reining in. You can see her dancing the solo in Babette Mangolte's black-and-white film, projected on the DTW lobby wall. Galloping, twisting flinging her limbs into moves and countermoves, she's a marvel of ribbony obliques; this dance could pass through the eye of a needle. It's fascinating to see the terrific Beasley perform the piece. He's a small, muscular man—supple but taut. His* Watermotor *is less about cool liquid than about molten metal that has to be worked fast before it hardens. There's no accompaniment but the sound of his breathing. The virtuosic performance lasts about two-and-a-half minutes, and we cheer. Beasley calmly rode Brown's bronco of a dance and didn't fall off.*

I would suggest that Visual Art's obsession with authenticity has less to do with respecting an artist's original intent and more to do with an inherited predisposition towards protecting ownership. Once again this is a larger conversation than can be explored fully here and now. (Maybe someone will give me a grant so I can study this more deeply. LOL.)

The larger point I'm making is two-fold. First, visual art performance, because of its object-based origins and the field's obsessions with "the real" and "authenticity" rejects craft and discipline. This is problematic because, frankly, it results in a lot of very bad performance. Second, because the visual arts world has a value-creating infrastructure, this bad performance is more highly valued in the marketplace than Contemporary Performance by time-based artists with origins in dance and theater. Performance work that is more sophisticated, thoughtful, challenging and virtuosic is de-prioritized and devalued in favor of unpracticed – but "real" – performative events created by visual artists.

There was a time when both visual art and performance valued craft. Times have changed. Experimental artists in both disciplines are uncomfortable with artifice, reject the obvious falsity of "psychological realism" and seek new modes of engagement with the public. The problem is that they do not share knowledge or even dialogue around their respective practices, aesthetics, goals and strategies. The Visual Art world has no incentive to value contemporary performance, because their work will remain remunerative regardless. Though I would like to see more visual artists reach across the fence to time-based artists and engage them in a

collaborative process, I'm not optimistic. If that is not going to happen, then it is time for Contemporary Performance makers to actively re-contextualize their work and for the arts infrastructure to develop strategies for creating value around experience design. Curators, administrators, critics and artists must work together to create a value-appreciation structure that will situate performance predicated on experimental dance and theater in the wider arts world, and identify ways to either leverage or recreate the visual arts model.

Unfortunately I don't have the time or money to go to grad school or take any of these curatorial workshops like ICPP or ICI, and as I jokingly said before, it is unlikely that I will get some kind of grant to actually research and write on these topics. I'm just a working stiff who has had to figure this out myself as I go along, self-educating as I go. This is only predicated on my life experience, not book learning. Like Michael Kaiser says, I'm just an amateur who needs to be properly instructed by the anointed Brahmins of High Culture. So who knows? Maybe I'm totally wrong. What do you think? What is your experience either lived or studied?

On Social Practice and Performance



I have been accused, from time to time, of burying the lede, so before I start in earnest, here's a précis:

> *The recent "re-discovery" of social practice in visual art builds on a long tradition of socially engaged art in both visual arts and performing arts practices. There are many performing artists (theater, dance, other) currently creating within this framework. I will urge these performing artists to appropriate the language of visual art practice and situate themselves in that tradition, applying to visual arts institutions for financial support, resources and presentation opportunities. At the same time the emergence of social practice as a trend speaks to two fundamental shifts in American culture:* one*, a broad re-thinking of the role of the arts in society and* two*, a rejection of corporate capitalism's demand that citizenship is predicated on being a consumer, not a creator or empowered participant in civic life.*

This is the first of what will hopefully be a series of articles exploring alternative performance practices and contexts and their implications. Ready? Here we go.

Recently Ben Valentine wrote an article on Social Practice over at Hyperallergic in which he asserts that:

> *The work of Social Practice is on the rise, but compared to the traditional art world news of auction prices and gallery openings, it doesn't seem to be receiving as much online attention. Institutions such as California College of the Arts, Portland State University, Otis College of Art, The Queens Museum of Art, Creative Time and more have come to emphasize this quietly growing field, but many news sources are slow to the show and struggle with representing the immersive projects. Could the qualities of Social Practice as a field be incompatible with global media outlets, especially for the internet?*

My first problem with this statement is that this field is "on the rise" and "quietly growing". While I have not yet had a chance to read Claire Bishop's new book Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship, I'm reasonably certain that she will demonstrate that this is a field with a long, long history going at least as far back as Joseph Beuys' concept of "social sculpture" if not further. I also have not yet read Shannon Jackson's Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics, though I quickly scanned what was available online, and she addresses all this in a much more thorough and thoughtful fashion. So feel free, reader, to chime in with comments.

Anyway, Social Practice, or socially engaged art, is perhaps becoming fashionable again in certain art circles, but it is not new or emergent. The second problem I have

is Valentine's assertion that this discipline isn't receiving as much online attention as "traditional art world news of auction prices and gallery openings". Theoretically, anyway, social practice is meant to exist in opposition to the commercial models of the "traditional" art world and, as such, should resist coverage in a commodity-based context. Certainly if the uber-trendy Nato Thompson and Creative Time can generate hundreds of metaphorical column inches about their various fashionable adventures in radicalism, then the practice is well-situated within the mainstream of the art market. Also, Valentine misses an opportunity to explore the idea of internet-based art exploring social practice or the possibilities for modeling alternative documentation and dissemination strategies outside hierarchically approved channels, something we at Culturebot are quite passionate about.

At the same time I was lent a copy of Pablo Helguera's Education for Socially Engaged Art. I'm slowly working my way through it – it is not a long read, but I am a busy guy. However, Culturebot was actually part of a group show at Exit Art with Pablo, so I am particularly interested in seeing how our ideas and practices might intersect. On his website he poses the following question:

> *An artist organizes a political rally about a local issue. The project, which is supported by a local arts center in a medium-size city, fails to attract many local residents; only a couple dozen people show up, most of whom work at the arts center. The event is documented on video and presented as part of an exhibition. In truth, the artist can claim to have organized a rally?*

I hope to find that Helguera will answer this question in the book. But the fact that this question can even be posed points to a problem inherent in the application of visual arts practices onto social structures and references the concerns that Valentine articulates about the art world's media coverage of social practice work. As an outsider to the visual art world, it seems to me that there may be a tendency for visual art practice to resist deep embeddedness, valuing concept and theory over application and implementation, documentation and creation of the "art object" over actual impact. It is enough to have a video in a gallery and talk about what you did at the reception with wine and cheese, but it doesn't ultimately matter if you created change in a meaningful way. Certainly this isn't true for all visual artists, but when aligned with certain segments of the market-driven art world, the likelihood of irresponsibility rises. This seems particularly evident in the work of Tino Sehgal who, admittedly, has little interest in the agency or subjectivity of his "interpreters", as evidenced in a recent New Yorker profile where he makes the deeply revealing and equally troubling assertion that, ""What my work is about is, Can something that is not an inanimate object be considered valuable?" Um, like, you mean, human beings?

[NB: Hal Foster's essay "The Artist As Ethnographer" does a fantastic job of articulating the problems and dangers (including well-meaning but inadvertent cultural imperialism) in "socially engaged art". The essay can be downloaded here.]

At roughly the same time Ben Valentine was writing his article at Hyperallergic, Michael Rohd contributed another in a series of articles at Howl Round about his twenty years developing "civic practice" techniques with Sojourn Theatre in Portland, Oregon. Reading about Michael's work and his planned Center for Performance and Civic Practice got me thinking about all of the performing arts practitioners who have engaged in this work rigorously and diligently over the years.

My first thought was how, yet again, artists in visual arts and performing arts contexts are exploring the same ideas at the same time with the same goals but for any number of reasons (I have strong opinions on this that would only distract us here) are not in dialogue with each other. So instead of collaboration and shared learning we have competition, redundancy and inefficiency. For instance, I recently had a conversation with an early-career visual artist who had only recently discovered the work of Augusto Boal, thinking Boal's theories were obscure, little-known practices of the avant-garde rather than a well-established and frequently-taught component of many university theater curricula.

My second thought was that the increasing visibility and attractiveness of this work from both visual and performing artists speaks to the possibility of real change in the role of the arts in communities, civic life and in the culture at large.

Social Practice, or Civic Practice, is, if nothing else, a vast, diverse and poorly defined field. For my purposes I'm going to use the term Social Practice as opposed to Civic Practice, and I will use this term to refer to any number of artistic projects in

various disciplines that emerge from engaging with social issues in community, that enlist “non-artists” in the creation and development of the project and have as a goal some kind of awareness-raising or sociological impact. This doesn’t preclude aesthetic considerations or the possibility for the realization of a singular artistic vision, but it implies a set of conditions that are outside of more traditional artistic practices.

I’ve been thinking about the idea of social practice in performance a lot since I returned from the Fusebox Festival in Austin, TX. We had just finished our Exit Art residency when we headed down to Texas, so I was already kicking around some of the ideas from that process. Then I saw 600 Highwaymen’s This Great Country, a site-based, de-constructed staging of Arthur Miller’s Death of A Salesman.

600 Highwaymen is a Brooklyn based theater company led by wife-and-husband team Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone. Michael has roots in Austin, so they went down there for 3 months to build this piece. Their casting process was long and involved, meeting with dozens of people trying to assemble just the right mix. In the end they had a diverse ensemble of non-actors and self-identified actors of all skill levels, races, ethnicities, age groups and abilities. The entire project was built in situ with the support of local participants leveraging local resources for costumes, rehearsal space, everything. The project was developed collaboratively under the guidance of Michael and Abby and was sited in an iconic local venue – The Lucky Lady Bingo Parlor, a distinctive location that reeked of decades of stale cigarette smoke and financial desperation.

By using non-traditional casting techniques and siting the work in an iconic venue, 600 Highwaymen succeeded in decoupling Miller’s play from its iconography, returning the focus to the plot, characters and situation. Even though Austin proper is relatively insulated from the current economic woes of the country, it is in Texas and the betrayal of the American Dream looms large over the landscape. Willy Loman’s plaintive voice and sad delusions ring clear, sharp and true.

The production was successful both as a work of art and as a demonstration of socially engaged art where local stakeholders gathered to work collectively on a project that had meaning and resonance for the community at large. Not coincidentally the method by which the performance was constructed – leverage local resources, barter, exchange, good will – ran counter to more traditional, commercial models of cultural production and in so doing articulated a meta-critique parallel to Miller’s original text.

Another theater project that could be equally well situated as “social practice” in a visual arts context is Aaron Landsman’s City Council Meeting. Subtitled “Performed Participatory Democracy”, City Council Meeting is a performance created fresh in each city where it is presented, with local artists, activists, government officials and other citizens. Basically Aaron and his collaborators have created a framework for staging a city council meeting. They go into a city and spend time with local stakeholders to identify important issues, ideas and entities and craft a participatory experience that engages with those ideas.

I remember participating in a workshop version of the production at HERE Arts Center on the same day I had visited Zuccotti Park and thought that OWS was mistaken as they marched down the street shouting “This is what democracy looks like.” Actually, Democracy looks more like the City Council meeting – tendentious, glacial, occasionally passionate, frequently boring, mostly mundane with brief moments of transcendent vision and dreams of endless possibility.

The project is currently scheduled to tour to various communities nationally and is bound to develop and grow as it moves. But even in its present form it is a positive indicator of the possibilities of developing scalable frameworks for the collaborative creation of socially engaged art.

This past summer The River To River Festival presented a workshop reading of Maureen Towey’s Three Sisters. Towey, who has collaborated with Michael Rohd on previous productions, has developed a concept for Chekhov’s play where it was developed in residence at the Good Companions Senior Center (through a SPARC Residency), engaging local non-actor senior citizens to collaborate with professional actors, all over 60 years old, to collaboratively develop a new version of the classic text. In this reading where the ensemble is comprised of a working group of seniors from different cultures, backgrounds and experiences, the text takes on new valences as it addresses issues of death and dying, love, loss, home, community and place.

And of course there is a long history of this kind of work in a theatrical context. Cornerstone Theater, originally itinerant but based in Los Angeles since 1992, has

been making this kind of work for nearly 30 years. Another long-running and deeply-embedded project is John Malpedes' legendary Los Angeles Poverty Department, which creates performances and multidisciplinary artworks that connect the experience of people living in poverty to the social forces that shape their lives and communities. Founded in 1985, LAPD is made up of people who make art and live and work on Skid Row.

Ping Chong's Undesirable Elements project is:

> *… an ongoing series of community-specific interview-based theater works examining issues of culture and identity of individuals who are outsiders within their mainstream community. It's not a traditional play or documentary-theater project performed by actors. Instead,* Undesirable Elements *is presented as a chamber piece of story-telling; a "seated opera for the spoken word" that exists as an open framework that can be tailored to suit the needs and issues facing any community. Each production is made with a local host organization and local participants. The development process includes an extended community residency during which Ping Chong + Company artists conduct intensive interviews with potential participants and get to know the issues and concerns facing that community. These interviews form the basis of a script that weaves cast members' individual experiences together in a chronological narrative touching on both political and personal experiences. The script is performed by the interviewees themselves, many of whom have never before spoken publicly.*

Melanie Joseph's Foundry Theater has developed many socially-engaged art projects from more "traditional" theatrical presentation to their most recent project – This Is How We Do It – a festival of dialogues about another world under construction – which, to my mind, can be seen as public symposia or a series of collaboratively created lecture/performances.

Minneapolis' Ten Thousand Things, while not exactly "socially engaged art" in the sense of using community members and non-artists in the creation of work, has developed an aesthetic and rigor that brings innovative, adventurous performances into underserved communities, demonstrating that challenging work need not be the sole province of the aesthete or insider.

I suppose an argument could even be made that The Living Theatre's "Paradise Now" was a form of "socially engaged art". That piece "sought to completely dissolve the boundaries of human interactions through a practice of live collective creation, forging a revolutionary harmony between actors and audience." "The purpose of the play is to lead to a state of being in which non-violent revolutionary action is possible," wrote Julian Beck.

From a description of the documentary DVD as featured on Arthur Magazine's website:

> *What happened each night onstage—and offstage, and then out into the streets—was a series of purposefully provocative and interventionist actions, from marijuana smoking and full-body group nudity to screamed declamations, intense arguments and (yes) orgies, often involving audience members.*

I'll have to leave that particular exploration for another time or another writer to articulate.

And in a more abstract or less overtly political way, Big Art Group's The People engages local community members as an integral component of the work. Rimini Protokoll's 100% London drew on what they call a 'reality trend' practice that "draws on the views of 'experts in daily life' and where everyday people are the principal characters."

At the same time there are many artists situated in the dance world who explore this kind of practice. Probably the most well known of these artists is Liz Lerman who for years has engaged people of multiple generations, backgrounds and communities in the research, development and performance of her work. More recently Naomi

Goldberg Haas' ongoing "Dances for a Variable Population" project has done extraordinary work with senior populations using classes and community collaborative programs to develop a contemporary movement vocabulary that is at once rigorous and accessible, erasing the border between dancer and non-dancer in the creation of professional performances. Currently the dance presenter Dancing In The Streets is developing a two-year embedded project called "The South Bronx Culture Trail" that engages artists, scholars, and community members in developing a physical and virtual trail connecting sites that played a significant role in spawning the rich cultural history of the South Bronx.

One might posit that Jerome Bel's The Show Must Go On could have social practice elements to it, in its engagement of non-dancers, or for that matter Sylvain Emard's Le Grand Continental. I am, admittedly, blurring the line between more presentational forms that incorporate non-performers into the creation and performance and work that is built in situ with, from and by community residents. I do this with the intention of raising questions of context and outcome, proposing that the incorporation of non-performers into contemporary work can destabilize the assumptions of audiences of traditional forms, essentially social practice in reverse.

All of which is to say that the "traditional" disciplines of dance and theater have a long history and a lot of practice in creating work that can be contextualized as "socially engaged". If the art world could get over its knee-jerk (and, frankly, outdated) rejection of "theater" and its practices, there is a significant opportunity to de-objectify visual arts performance practice and share knowledge and skills across contexts.

While I would hope that visual artists practicing socially engaged art would avail themselves of the resources of the dance, theater and performance world, I would also urge artists working in theater and dance to appropriate the language and contexts of visual art. First because the thinking that comes out of the visual art world is useful when developing theoretical frameworks around performance projects, but also because this might open up new streams of funding if performance practitioners learn to write about their work in a way that enables them to apply to visual arts funders. Creative Time funded Paul Chan to bring Classical Theatre of Harlem's Waiting For Godot to New Orleans as a site-specific work. They wouldn't have funded the production if it were contextualized as a theater project. If you read Pasternak and Thompson's statements it is as if they had discovered the idea of using community engagement as a means of contextualizing and producing theater. To be super-cynical – if they're going to pretend we don't exist or exist merely to be co-opted towards their ends, then we should just call what we do visual art and try to access their money.

Along those lines, while this becomes problematic on many levels and runs counter to the essential ephemerality of performance (I recently had a long conversation with a presenter about this) maybe performing artists should think about creating documentation as art object or some other form of residue/evidence that translates into something that can be bought and sold. This is something Culturebot began to tentatively explore at our Exit Art show, and other more established artists, like Ralph Lemon, are also thinking about. The fact is that the visual arts world has created a significant economy in documentation, contextual materials, residual evidence and even "experience as object" – there is no reason for the exchange to be solely one way. Performance practitioners should actively co-opt the frameworks of visual art insofar as it is capable to benefit from that association.

On a much less cynical angle, or at least from a more telescopic perspective, the rise of "socially engaged art" in both worlds, I think, points to the larger dissatisfaction of artists with the economies of our respective contexts and the economic inequity of our society as a whole. I will explore the "means of production" angle more fully in a separate essay, but generally speaking if we look at programs like the NEA's ArtPlace initiative and the language being used about community, placemaking and social engagement, we can see a trend away from big institutions and Big Culture towards more sustainable (in all senses of the word) cultural structures. Not every city needs a symphony, an opera, a ballet, a big ass Museum. The truth is that the arts really become transformative when we move away from spectatorship and towards engagement. I was talking with an experienced designer recently who thoughtfully pointed out that even dance clubs need wallflowers, and it is important to recognize (a la Ranciere) that spectatorship CAN BE a form of active engagement – but I will propose that the structures of spectatorship need to be changed and the assumptions behind the traditional audience/performer relationship need to be re-examined. (All of this plays into the ideas we're exploring here around critical horizontalism). Either way, we know people are more excited about arts and culture

when they feel a part of it, rather than when they are just watching something because they are told it is good for them.

Now is a good moment for performing arts presenting institutions to look at Skramstad's prescription for museums in the 21st Century and take that into consideration as well – to take as their mission "nothing less than to engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives." The key word here being EXPERIENCES.

The implications of the transition from presenting to engaging, from watching to experiencing, speak to the possibilities of reclaiming agency. Audiences are no longer passive consumers. They are not defined by the transactional nature of traditional presenting. Performative projects are no longer mere spectacle, they are platforms for connection, even civic engagement. Going back to the Greeks, theater was a place where people came together to look into who they were as a community,and to imagine who they might become. Here we are presented with the opportunity to revisit that purpose and redefine it for the Information Age. Socially Engaged Art, whether framed as Visual Art, Theater or Dance – or something else entirely – opens up enormous possibilities. It would be great if all artists, regardless of practical self-identification, could meet across their differences to change the way art is valued and interpreted in our culture and advocate for deeper more meaningful engagement with the public at large.

Some Thoughts on Attention, Language and Demand



Andy Ascends – photo by Andrew Federman ©2012

A few weeks ago I had a meeting with a curator/producer for a television show that creates documentaries on visual artists for PBS. It was an interesting discussion, as usual, wherein the gap between our worlds became eminently clear. First off, I was talking about writing, dramaturgy, etc. – and he said that in the visual arts world they have dramaturges, they're called curators. He said it in a really dick-y, condescending way (natch) – and of course, the point I was trying to make was that, yes, visual arts curators are more likely to write contextual materials about an artist's work than performing arts curators, but STILL visual arts curators, generally, don't know fuck-all about performance. They just don't have any knowledge whatsoever about theater, dance or the history of performance theory from Aristotle to Hans-Thies Lehmann to Ranciere. So they are, unfortunately, inadequately equipped to meaningfully advise their artists on how to engage with the aesthetic, formal, presentational and logistical challenges of making live performance.

He then went on to say that visual artists making performance, like performing artists, think about audience. And once again I had to point out that perhaps they do, but not in the same way. Visual artists – and of course this is a vast generalization – don't actually think about audience experience because they have very little expectation of attention. Visual art is often experienced in a very casual way, in a gallery setting, and this expectation of brief, transitory engagement carries over to performance. I have had numerous visual arts curators (and artists) tell me that the main thing they hate about theater and dance is having to sit still and watch something that takes more than 10 minutes. Even Marina Abramovic doesn't expect you to pay attention. She – or her re-enactors – may stay in position for hours at a time – body-as-object – but you are free to come and go as you please, to look or not look, to mosey around as if you are shopping, inspecting merchandise, and then move on to the next thing. Maybe I'm biased. I'm not a visual person and I have been told that there are people who will gaze at a painting or sculpture for hours on end, meditating on its meaning and appreciating its qualities. I'm not one of them and I've never seen anybody doing it, so I'm going to stick with the passive, casual, observer theory of engaging with visual art.

I'm not suggesting that this kind of passive, fleeting engagement is necessarily lesser than the experience of sustained attention, only that it is different. Personally, however, I prefer an artistic practice that demands a mode of engagement counter to the frameworks of commodity and mass entertainment. We exist in a world that abjures interiority or reflection while it glorifies surface over substance, vaunts spectacle over subtlety, demands immediate judgement (thumbs up/thumbs down), engenders distractibility and enforces expectations of immediate gratification. The world we live in prefers that we not think about why, or how, or who we are, unless it is in a self-help context that can be marketed to, packaged and sold. But I digress – the point being that I've been thinking a lot about attention, the nature and value of it, ever since that meeting. Fortunately I've seen a lot of work that resonates with that over the past few weeks.

On Saturday June 16th I went to experience Yehuda Duenyas' project The Ascent out in Sunset Park. I didn't get up to EMPAC to check it out there, so I was eagerly awaiting the opportunity to try it out. Ariel Kaminer's article in the NY Times does a great job of describing it. (I wanted to write about The Ascent sooner but was embargoed b/c of the Times! It is so frustrating to be in this quasi-journalist half-

blogger, half-legit media outlet space!!!) ANYWAY – the basic premise is that you get hooked up with this headband that reads your EEG waves. Then you get put into a harness that attaches to this rig and the quieter you make your mind, the higher you go. The higher you go, the more stimulus (lights, fog, music) you get, so you have to maintain your Quiet Mind in an increasingly chaotic environment. It was one of the coolest things I have ever done in my life. I went in with high expectations and they were totally exceeded. I told Yehuda afterwards that I felt like it was some kind of a Jedi training exercise. The experience was like meditation but very different – it was as if you had to send your mind out into space and be open to registering all the stimuli and events and "facts" of reality, while maintaining an "uncarved block" state of non-attachment. Oh, and of course, all this while you're suspended 20 feet or so in the air and you're not quite sure how you got up there in the first place. Pretty freakin' cool!

I think the most exciting thing about The Ascent is not necessarily the tech aspect but the radical proposition that this performance happens entirely in your head, and that you control your experience with your thoughts. For the first time ever the performer and the audience and the performance are all one. That's, like, the future, man.

There is so much to say about this – but in terms of the idea of "attention" – this is really a profound project, because the more attention you pay, the deeper and better your experience is, in immediately tangible terms. It is all about practicing attention, which is a much-needed exercise in our society and completely counter to the prevailing inducements to splinter attention and try and apprehend as much stimuli as possible.

Then, on Sunday June 17th I went to the Bang On A Can Marathon at the World Financial Center as part of the River To River Festival (full-disclosure, R2R is a big part of my day job). The 12 hour marathon was amazing with far too much music to go into here, but two sequences in particular struck me. One was a composition by Thurston Moore called "Stroking Piece" performed by the Bang On A Can All-Stars which was amazing. I found a version of it online here:

> *It was hypnotic and profound, starting from a very simple repeated note/figure and expanding on that simple figure to explore a range of dynamics, tones and sonic environments. Of course it sounded like Sonic Youth and all the other bands that followed in their wake, and I'll be honest, I'm a big fan of shoe-gazing from My Bloody Valentine to the lesser-known Jessamine and their brethren. I find the experience of deep listening very pleasurable.*

Speaking of deep listening, later on that evening Pauline Oliveiros and the Deep Listening Band performed an incredible set using conch shells, one of those huge Tibetan mountain horns and some interesting vocal techniques. Oliveiros is, in fact, the founder of the Deep Listening Institute, an organization dedicated to promoting this mode of engagement and supporting artists and projects that explore the framework. From their website:

> *Deep Listening® is a philosophy and practice developed by Pauline Oliveros that distinguishes the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary selective nature of listening. The result of the practice cultivates appreciation of sounds on a heightened level, expanding the potential for connection and interaction with one's environment, technology and performance with others in music and related arts.*

> *The practice of Deep Listening provides a framework for artistic collaboration and musical improvisation and gives composers, performers, artists of other disciplines, and audiences new tools to explore and interact with environmental and instrumental sounds.*

I will unabashedly admit that my appreciation for meditative arts experience stems from an adolescent passion for spirituality and transcendence that led to reading way too much Hermann Hesse, taking LSD and listening to the Grateful Dead. But those explorations subsequently led to much more serious and thoughtful investigations of being and nothingness, Zen, the nature of attention, embodiment and presence, and

trying to cultivate a way of being in the world that is not predicated too much on attachment and desiring. That being said, I think that the “spiritual” impulse may lead someone to certain investigations, but it is a pre-condition to those investigations, not a result. And some people, like myself, have always enjoyed the experience of thinking (or “not-thinking” I guess) that art can provide. A great dance, music or theatrical performance/experience can bring us into a place of pure engagement that is, to varying degrees, comprised of observation, emotional stimulation, meditation and intellectual provocation.

So here I was in the WFC Winter Garden going deep with Pauline Oliveiros and her band. Apparently, from what I’m told, she’s been working with a laptop/programmer guy and they’ve developed software that processes the sound to create the experience of being at the bottom of a 20,000 gallon cistern. It was completely immersive and transportive, I just sat there with my eyes closed, gently nodding my head and going farther and farther out (in?). Truly wonderful.

When I first start writing this article (a few weeks ago) I was going to write at some length about how this form of engagement should influence critical writing. But that ended up taking the form of an entirely separate article, that I encourage you to read here. As distracting as reading on the internet can be, for a writer it allows a certain flexibility in terms of word count and form. It allows us to integrate media, to hyperlink, to create a text-based experiential response to a performance that, hopefully, amplifies the ideas and conveys the feeling of the event itself.

In the article linked to above, I discuss the difference between consumer-oriented reviewing and embedded “criticism” that comes from within the world of the artist and seeks to foster engagement with audiences, building and empowering communities to actively engage in the arts. There is a linkage between the idea of cultivating attention and changing the way we write about performance. Because the aesthetic proposition of much of contemporary performance is about paying attention, it implicitly defies consumerism. It is not easily commodified or passively consumed and as much as some people complain about the “90 minutes, no intermission” structure that seems to be the default for so much work, those 90 minutes require more thought, usually, than 120 minutes of a blockbuster movie. So as “publishers” we are tasked with developing platforms that sustain engagement with artist’s projects over time, providing audience/observers access to the ideas, investigations and influences that go into a given performance. And arts writers are tasked with developing a language that is somewhere between the hyper-academic and the panderingly populist, that leverages the strengths of the internet as a medium while resisting its negative temptations.

And in a way this leads to a discussion I’ve been hearing about “building demand for dance”. Across the board, for as long as I’ve been on the administrative side of the arts sector, I have heard venues and funders alike lamenting audience attrition. The older audiences that have traditionally supported Big Culture with their subscriptions and donations are declining and aren’t being replaced by new audiences. Subscription models, ticket prices, consumer behavior, priorities, entertainment options, access to the arts, etc. etc. And to my mind, most of the people trying to come up with solutions are so deeply invested in the models of Big Culture that they just aren’t interested in adapting and changing. So they convene a bunch of “little culture” organizations and give them training programs predicated on the methodologies of Big Culture. (From what I understand.) Surprisingly, it actually seems as if the NEA gets it, with their Art Place initiative and their various other new innovation programs. They’re trying to make this cultural transition as gentle as possible for Big Culture and Little Culture alike.

But going back to this issue of “demand”. I’m reluctant to even use that word because it is predicated on an economic model of supply and demand that treats art as commodity. Look, I’m a producer and I spend a lot of time with Excel spreadsheets dealing with dollars as they relate to the arts. I know that there is an economy involved here. However, the commodity based framework of supply and demand is not necessarily the most effective framework for building audiences. It is not about creating a more fertile environment for selling arts products. It is about building transparency, porousness and openness, about re-positioning the role of the arts in communities.

I was talking to a possible revenue source who said their giving was transitioning from arts to education and I felt compelled to respond that the arts – especially performance, but all art – IS education. The best art engages with all kinds of ideas: we can look at performance as a “space-time object” – a nexus of information. A good teacher can unpack art to lead into all kinds of fields of knowledge from

neuroscience to history to economics to reading/writing/arithmetic. For experiential learners the arts can provide a way into information that books may not.

Building demand is about re-positioning the role of the arts in our culture. Administrators and funders need to start looking at institutions, venues and festivals as ways to bring people together in dialogue and community. Artists need to think of their work not solely in regard to what happens in the moment of performance but as an investigative arc, one which they can share with others and invite people into. And writers need to start thinking of themselves not merely as critics but as facilitators. We must work closer with artists to understand their investigations and then we must be able to face outward as expositors to the general community. While there will probably always be a role for “reviewers” in the MSM and there will probably always be a demand for theoreticians and academics, what is really required at this moment is an army of “new critics”, writers who are also advocates, sharers, inviters, organizers and “framers”, who are passionate about how the arts have informed and transformed their lives and feel called to share that passion with the world.

That’s why Culturebot is here and we hope to be here for years to come, sharing this long, strange trip and amazing journey with you, our fellow travelers on the golden road to the miraculous.

Panel As Performance: Deconstructing The Performa Event



Ralph Lemon. Untitled. 2008. Performed at The Museum of Modern Art, 2011. With Okwui Okpokwasili. © 2011 Yi-Chun Wu/The Museum of Modern Art

"PANEL AS PERFORMANCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE PERFORMA EVENT" is the first section of a multipart essay I'm writing called "The Economics of Ephemerality" which examines the relationship of performance and visual art from a variety of perspectives including economics, curatorial practice and cultural ecology.

As a performance curator I spend a lot of time working with artists to develop theater, dance, live art and events. My education and training was as a theater maker and I bring that perspective to my work, as well as the writing that I do about performance. Of the many things to consider throughout the construction, implementation and analysis of performance, key among them are place, time, scenography, casting and content. One thing that theater and dance makers learn early on is that every element of a performance, by virtue of being on a stage or within a site-based frame, will have meaning and intentionality attributed to it.

Anyone who knows RoseLee Goldberg will attest that she is very knowledgeable about performance and is quite a show person herself, with a wonderful personal sense of drama and theatricality. Given that, and her indomitable entrepreneurial spirit, I can only assume that the construction of the Performa event was intentional and strategic. So let's look at the event as if it were a performance and analyze the presentational aesthetics of the panel.

Place: Judson Memorial Church is iconic as the birthplace of the Judson Dance Theater, one of the most influential movements in contemporary dance history, the origin point for "pedestrian movement" and a set of theories that still loom large over choreographic practice 50 years later. Judson artists have a history with the visual arts world – Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, etc. Many of them are still alive and have a lot to say but they were notably absent from the conversation. More on that to follow.

Time: The Performa panel was held on Monday, September 17 from 6:30PM – 8PM. To the outside observer this may not mean anything, but it is worth noting that Movement Research has, for more than twenty years, held their free performance series on Monday nights at Judson. This series has served as a space to share ideas and research, for emerging choreographers to show their work and, generally, as a platform for building community. That same night across town, at the same time, Danspace Project was presenting an evening with Lucinda Childs showing films and discussing her work and history with Judson.

While Performa has no authentic history with Judson as a site or a movement, it managed to displace Movement Research from its long-standing, historical home and divert audiences from Danspace Project, creating a direct negative effect to two organizations that are truly essential to the dance ecology in NYC.

Casting: The Performa event featured presentations by RoseLee Goldberg, historian Jennifer Homans, choreographer Ralph Lemon, MOMA curator Jenny Schlenzka and art critic David Velasco. Other than Ralph there was not a single representative of the dance world to provide historical context or divergent narratives to the one being presented. I saw Barbara Dufty, long-time Executive Director of Trisha Brown Dance Company in the audience. Why was she not onstage? Where was a representative from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company? Other than Ralph – who was obviously constrained in what he felt comfortable saying – there was no one with an

authentic practical knowledge of dance making and presenting in the museum context. Homans, while deeply knowledgeable about history and a passionate advocate for dance, either did not have the opportunity or interest in interrogating the assumptions of the event.

Content: Jennifer Homans opened the event with a thoughtful and informative history lesson that actually contradicted a lot of what followed. While the Performa event purported to affirm the long history of MoMA's interest in dance, Homans pointed out that Lincoln Kirstein's attempts to establish MoMA as a multidisciplinary institution were unsuccessful. MoMA's dance archives, donated to the museum by Kirstein in 1939, were transferred to Harvard in 1946 and by 1948 the remaining archives were returned to being a division of the library rather than a discrete entity – hardly a ringing endorsement for historical and enduring institutional support of dance.

The evening was rife with problematic and misleading assertions. Homans, Lemon, Schlenzka and Velasco all referred to the Atrium at MoMA as "public space", which is fundamentally untrue. As a performance curator who focuses largely on truly public, free, site-based work, I know the difference between public, public/private, POPS and all the other kinds of space in the city. It costs $25 to get into MoMA, thus by definition it cannot be "public" space. It is private property, owned by an institution that requires the public to pay for admission. Not to mention that all of the artists being presented in Ralph's platform at MoMA can be seen at The Kitchen, Danspace Project, New York Live Arts or Baryshnikov Arts Center for $20 or under for a full production – but more on that later.

David Velasco, either through ignorance or willful elision of facts, asserted that visual arts museums are increasingly supporting the creation and presentation of dance, citing the Walker Arts Center's commissioning of work by Miguel Gutierrez and Sarah Michelson. Once again, this may seem to be true on the surface but is in fact wildly inaccurate. The Walker – not a visual arts museum, by the way, but a Contemporary Arts Center, deliberately multidisciplinary for over 40 years – did not commission Miguel and Sarah, Philip Bither did. Philip is the performance curator at The Walker and curates independently of the visual arts department. The commissioning funds come out of his budget, not the visual arts budget, and one can speculate that this is an ongoing challenge.

What's more, the Walker was not the sole commissioner of either Gutierrez or Michelson's work. Both artists create work of such scale and ambition that they require multiple commissioners. From personal experience, having worked on two Michelson projects that went to The Walker and provided not-inconsiderable residency support for Gutierrez' current project, I can say confidently that these projects are expensive and challenging to produce, requiring a level of logistical and financial support that is unlikely at best to come from the visual arts sector, a point I will address in more detail later.

Dramaturgy: The Performa panel was characterized as a "discussion" when in fact it was a series of thematically related presentations. Prefatory framing remarks by Goldberg and a contextualizing keynote by Homans created the appearance of an informative and thoughtful conversation on dance in the art world – or specifically museums – when in fact it was little more than a publicity event for MoMA's upcoming dance platform through which RoseLee brilliantly positioned herself and Performa as the authoritative voice on the subject.

The event was structured in such a way that no actual discussion was possible among panelists who were chosen to insure that there would be no substantial narrative differences or dissent.

Culturebot has previously discussed how the inherent formal structure of the panel discussion reinforces hierarchies of expertise and opinion that hinder actual discourse and prevent rigorous interrogation by the audience. This was certainly the case here where the event ran late with the "question and answer" period beginning at 8PM, allowing for only a few questions, mostly toothless and uninformed.

Insofar as the event served to reinforce Performa's position as arbiter of taste and advocate for dance in the art world, it is worth noting that the most recent edition of Performa had not a single dance commission and that the Dance After Choreography series in Performa 07 (2007) featured presentations by choreographers Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel, and Martin Spångberg – none of which were commissions. The only recognized dance artist that received a commission was Yvonne Rainer, in a co-commission with Documenta. I was unable to verify the commissioning and funding structures of Performa but anecdotally I am told that commissions – true commissions – go to a handful of prominent visual artists whereas choreographers are offered the opportunity to fundraise jointly, with no

guarantee. Since Performa self identifies as a festival of “visual art performance” this is consistent, but as visual artists increasingly make work that heavily references and relies on the techniques of Theater and Dance, we are getting into a slippery slope of formal appropriation without actual skill or knowledge, thus Performa’s stance becomes problematic.

The general public does not usually look closely at festival language, but there are subtle and important distinctions between “commissioning”, “presenting”, “co-presenting” and other terms. A festival the size of Performa (with, admittedly, a modest budget) attains scale through partnerships. The core content is the most substantially funded and projects are funded in decreasing amounts as you move outward until the most peripheral events are merely included in the marketing and publicity efforts. This is not unique to Performa – it is a common structure and strategy. What makes it noteworthy in the case of Performa is what appears to be a significant discrepancy in funding and framing. Performa seems to substantially support visual artists making performance, but not artists with a primarily performance-based practice, while positioning itself as advocate and supporter of these forms. This is emblematic of the larger relationship between performing arts and visual arts sectors and is complicated by deliberate campaigns of misrepresentation and misdirection.

The only person on the panel at the Performa event who was empowered to speak without restraint also had the most incentive to dissemble and interestingly enough was the most candid and transparent. I was reminded of those moments in politics where a candidate is caught off guard or thinks they are in a safe environment and accidentally tells the truth. Jenny Schlenzka’s presentation at the Performa event was remarkable for what it revealed, whether by accident or intent, and that is what we will explore in the next section.

On Curatorial Practice and Cultural Production



“CURATORIAL PRACTICE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION” is one section of a multipart essay I’m writing called “The Economics of Ephemerality” which examines the relationship between performance and visual art from a variety of perspectives including economics, curatorial practice and cultural ecology.

PREFACE

Since I’ve started writing these essays I’ve gotten feedback and comments that I sound hostile, or that I’m petty, that I’m unnecessarily focusing on the negative or that I’m in some way antagonistic to visual arts. This is simply not true – I appreciate visual art. But I love performance. I have been attending and making dance and theater (and music) since I was in elementary school, I have devoted my life to the study, practice and support of the performing arts. For whatever reason static visual art – paintings, sculpture – has never really affected me in the way performance has. It is only in theater, and later in dance, that I have experienced true aesthetic arrest, where I have been profoundly moved, enlightened, entertained and transformed. I have followed a path from the known, traditional modes of performance into realms of experimentation and the avant-garde; I have developed a passion for work that interrogates itself, its forms and the culture at large. I value the visual artists that venture into performance because of the questions they ask and the challenges they raise, the way they can push performing artists to innovate, grow and change.

But as visual art performance moves collectively from the anti-mimetic frameworks of the 50s-80s and more fully into the realm of performance rooted in dance and theater, I’m deeply troubled by the lack of curiosity and respect that is being demonstrated. You can’t really understand Impressionism or Abstract Expressionism without knowing at least a little about the history of representation in visual art, the impact of photography and the shift from craft in painting the world as it is as opposed to the world as you see it. By the same token it is impossible to fully understand Judson or the French Conceptualists or Sarah Michelson without knowing about ballet, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and George Balanchine. You can’t really appreciate Richard Maxwell or The Wooster Group without knowing some history of American Theater, the origins of psychological realism and its rejection by the avant-garde over the course of the 20th century.

To truly appreciate and understand dance and theater you have to learn at least a little history, you need to learn about how these forms are made, why they do what they do and what makes the work succeed or fail, whether traditional or experimental. There is a significant and important difference between Richard Maxwell’s “non-acting” style and actual bad acting. There is a significant and important difference between Jérôme Bel’s use of non-dancers in his work and artists who just don’t know how to dance. Dance and theater artists dedicate their lives to developing their craft and learning how to make what they make while continually moving their investigations forward.

One of the real issues here is that the development of craft in the performing arts requires labor – labor that can’t be outsourced. The visual arts sector as a whole has come to reject craft; and it has come to reject labor as well. Major artists outsource the production of their artworks to fabricators and craftsmen and apprentices whose skills are considered subservient to the intellect and imagination of the artist. Museums specifically propagate and support that structure. Within that structure and philosophy is an implicit devaluation of the work of the performing artist whose forms demand embodiment, presence, time and subjectivity; forms that resist, or at the very least interrogate, objectification by reminding us that it takes work, labor, craft and skill to perform.

I am not hostile to visual arts as a field and certainly not to visual artists individually. Performance in the art world such as the most recent Whitney Biennial or Ralph

Lemon's platform at MoMA are good insofar as they expose a wider audience to investigative forms of dance and theater, leveraging the museum's intellectual infrastructure to contextualize the work historically and aesthetically. Still, one is compelled to investigate why dance in the museum and why now? One must ask: why do dance and theater so value the attention of the museums and what is the trade-off for the attention and visibility?

Unless we interrogate and question the museum's motives and long term strategies, until we really look at the economics of cultural production and the frameworks through which value is being created around dance – and performance generally – the performing arts sector risks being subsumed by a visual arts world that is fundamentally a market-based system about creating value around objects, a system that is voracious as it constantly seeks novelty and new markets to exploit.

Thus I am called to advocate for those theater and dance artists – my colleagues – who have dedicated their lives, as I have, to the performing arts; and when necessary call attention to the conditions in which their work is developed and evaluated.

On The Differences in Curatorial Practice & Cultural Production in Visual Art and Performing Arts

For most of September and into October my job as a performance curator took me across the country from PICA's TBA Festival in Portland, Oregon, to The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival to a dance platform in Minneapolis, to the Headlands Arts Center in San Francisco.

As I traveled I talked to fellow performance curators from various types of venues, from visual arts institutions to multidisciplinary contemporary arts centers to festivals and performance spaces. I talked to artists, writers, producers and audiences about a wide range of issues and ideas, and quite a bit specifically about the economic issues of performing arts versus visual arts. My discoveries were not necessarily shocking, but rather confirmation of an unspoken but very real truth about significant cultural differences and structural economic disparity – not necessarily in the way artists are compensated, but in institutional funding and project support. One of the issues that frequently came up was a knowledge gap about what a performance curator does, what presenting performance entails and how this differs from curatorial practice in the visual arts. This essay will explore differences in curatorial practice and cultural production, but only lightly touch on economics, which will be covered in more detail in a subsequent essay.

I want to begin by saying that curating performance as a profession is a relatively recent development. This is more complicated than can possibly be described here, but it really only dates back to the 70s at best. My discussions with performing arts presenters of that generation reveal an incredible and exciting narrative that someone ought to write or undertake as an oral history project: David White, Mark Russell, Mark Murphy, Philip Bither and some key others started at a handful of institutions and built a field where very little previously existed. Artist-run organizations like DTW, PS122 and On The Boards in Seattle grew up out of a fertile cultural moment, mostly funded by the NEA and have become institutions in their own right. As I said, this is a fantastic untold story that someone should write – but not me and not now. When the field began there was no formal training, there were no graduate programs – these curators combined a passion for experimental dance or avant-garde theater with, frequently, a countercultural bent and entrepreneurial savvy to build an infrastructure that would eventually turn into American Contemporary Performance.

On the other hand, the role of the curator in the visual arts has a long history. The word "curator" itself originated as a position in the church and comes from the Latin: "one who cares, from cūrāre to care for, from cūra care." (h/t to Caleb Hammons for kicking the knowledge!) This will become significant later, but for now, suffice it to say that this long history has led to a well-established and well-funded infrastructure for educating, training and employing visual arts curators. Nearly every college and university in America has an Art History major; there are countless curatorial graduate programs (just look at the website for the College Art Association!) not to mention organizations like ICI, ISCP and their ilk.

As far as I know there is not a single undergraduate program on curating (or studying) contemporary performance and only one program for advanced study in the field – The Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, founded two years ago at Wesleyan by Sam Miller.

In a previous article I mentioned how I met with an associate curator at Art21.org – well, I don't think I mentioned the organization at that time, but that's who it was.

Anyway, I was talking about the importance of dramaturgy in performance and he said, snidely, “Visual arts has dramaturgs, they’re called curators.” At the time I just thought he was being a snobby and condescending but over time I’ve come to realize that he was accidentally but accurately pointing out one of the major differences between performance curators and visual arts curators – and one of the major problems of visual arts institutions and curators moving into performance without any real knowledge of the field. My previous post on the Performa Event was framed in a way to suggest some of the things that performance curators look at and for, but there is much more to it than that.

Writing is a central activity of visual arts curating. Visual Arts curators develop the concept of the exhibit; they write the wall texts and the catalogue copy – from what I understand they design the exhibition through object placement and directing the path through which the observer is meant to move. I’ve been told that visual arts exhibits can take two and three years to organize with a lot of time spent researching and writing, developing contextual materials and theoretical frameworks for why a given artist is significant and why the objects have value. I would imagine there is also a fair amount of logistical work on identifying the objects to be displayed, arranging for loans from collections when necessary, etc. But still, the thoughtful procurement and arrangement of objects is very different from working with live people and art that has yet to be created.

As opposed to visual arts curators, performance curators rarely have time to develop a writing practice and there are pragmatic reasons for this. One is that curating time-based art forms takes time. I’ve been on studio visits with visual arts curators and they take maybe an hour, tops. You have the meeting, you look at the work, you listen to the pitch and if you like it, you agree to include them in the exhibit and don’t usually have to do too much until the artist makes the work and shows up to install.

Performance curators have to actually see the work – which usually takes at least two hours. Actually, we have to see A LOT of work, because we need to see all the various developments in the field – who is doing what, who is exploring what, who is collaborating with whom, etc. etc. It’s not like we can go out gallery hopping and see the work of dozens of artists in a weekend. Curating performance requires seeing a lot of performance, which takes a lot of time. If we’re really, really working hard we can see 7-10 shows a week, plus maybe drop into a few rehearsals or workshops, which already adds up to close to 40 hours a week – and that’s just research, not including time spent in meetings or doing administrative tasks.

Once you’ve seen a project and agreed to commission or present an artist, the work really begins. A good curator, even with a solid support team, is still very much a producer. You have lots of conversations with the artist trying to figure out what the project really is; you have to tease out how to implement what they’re imagining. You may have to help assemble a team of collaborators which means working with MORE artists – lighting designers, sound designers, set designer, costumers – each of whom is an artist in their own right, each of whom has an opinion and is an expert in their field. If you are working on a project of any scale you have to help find developmental residencies and raise money – performers need to get paid for rehearsals, not just performances! You have to find commissioning partners, you have to develop budgets and manage them, you have to help the project grow and evolve in a million different ways and consider countless variables – and you have to work with people, lots of people, to get it done. And that’s just building the show.

Once the show is built and you want to present it, you have to feed and house and care for the performers. You have to load the show in – the lighting, sound, set, effects, costumes, etc. And nothing ever works as planned and even though you have tech directors and production managers everything has to be constantly re-negotiated and tweaked and fixed at the last minute because a part is missing, the European designer specified a type of wallboard that doesn’t exist in the States, the choreographer is demanding a stuffed deer of a certain height and the only one available is in Pennsylvania and will cost $1500 to have the guy drive it to the city in his pick-up but you’re already over budget. And so on. And so on.

You have to massage egos and nurture and care for sensitive artists who are putting their bodies, souls and reputations on the line and are freaking out because they’ve spent two years and all their money to make a show that will be performed for four nights and then, possibly, probably, vanish. You have to worry about the marketing and the PR and if anybody’s coming and a thousand other concerns just to make the art happen. AND if you are curating at an institution or for a festival, you are probably doing this for upwards of a dozen projects at any given time, all in different stages of development with different needs, timelines, budgets and personalities. You do the math – it’s very time and labor intensive.

So who has time to write? Its not that performance curators don't think about the dramaturgical elements of a given work or consider bigger ideas when assembling a season of performances – we do. We talk about it all the time, it is central to our job and our conversations and our practice, but we are so busy curating that we have very little time to write about it. Let's face it – the only reason I have been able to write about my field on Culturebot is because I have had, essentially, two full-time jobs, working 80+ hours a week for nearly ten years, trying to document, analyze and contextualize performance, at no small expense to my personal life, health and bank account. But I digress.

The point is that there is a significant difference between the bodies of knowledge required to curate performance and visual art, they require different practical knowledge but more significantly they actually require different ways of seeing. And because of the different contexts from which these curatorial roles originated, they have deeply different practices. This is problematic for both sectors.

I'm the first to admit that Contemporary Performance needs to develop a practice and body of contextual writing akin to that which exists in the visual arts world. That's why I started Culturebot. If this work is to be seen as having value unto itself, a body of literature needs to exist both inside and outside of academia so as to provide points of entry for audiences and to adumbrate the connections between the performed event and the world outside the theater. Dramaturgy in conventional narrative theater and dance, particularly in the States, usually takes the form of historical program notes. But as contemporary performance continues to become more and more widely presented, as non-narrative forms of time-based art permeate the cultural landscape, the worlds of dance and theater must develop a parallel writing practice. Given the exigencies of curating performance, either a new dramaturgical position must be introduced to the production process or the curator role must change to allow for a writing practice. Otherwise it will be visual arts curators who will end up developing the frameworks for evaluating performance, they will write the historical record, they will design the structure for assigning value and they will do some from a perspective that favors their biases. And, frankly, that would be a tragedy.

This may sound alarmist, but I don't think it is. At the Performa Event Jenny Schlenzka clearly asserted that she finds dance interesting because it allows curators to "re-envision the format of the exhibition". This was a welcome revelation insofar as it clarifies why dance is interesting to visual arts curators – not for any inherent value of the form but rather its ability to support the museum's process of reinvention. I will go into this in greater depth in a subsequent post – but this points to an important distinction between supporting a form and using it as object. Whether we're talking about Creative Time's utilization of Classical Theater of Harlem's Waiting for Godot in Paul Chan's "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans" or Tino Sehgal's "Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things (2000)" at the New Museum's "After Nature" exhibition or any number of other works, what we see is the visual arts world re-purposing discrete works of performance or appropriating the formal concerns of performance disciplines and using them for other ends, while simultaneously and implicitly rejecting that these forms have value unto themselves for what they are.

This is not mere conjecture – from what I've heard from colleagues across the country, the visual arts institutions, i.e. museums, and visual arts curators have had little idea of what they were getting themselves into when they venture into presenting performance. They are loathe to seek advice from practitioners in the field – curators, producers, etc. – while at the same time being unprepared for what it takes. My understanding is that they are, generally, not interested in learning how we look at performance and even less interested in how we produce it.

I think that this, from an article in the Guardian on the opening of The Tanks at Tate Modern, substantiates my assertion:

> *The desire for live encounters, by both artists and audiences, was partly a reaction to the economic and political climate, said Dercon. Artists and audiences were expressing a disillusion with the impersonal systems that dominate modern life, and reaching for the human encounter.*

"I'm not going to talk about politicians and banks, but we are completely surrounded by systems that do things to us and at us. Performance proposes a new form of interconnectivity."

The desire to focus on work without physical form, that cannot straightforwardly be bought and sold, may also express a wider dissatisfaction among the art world for the vagaries of the art market and the extreme commercialization of art before the financial crash of 2008.

According to Catherine Wood, Tate's curator of contemporary art and performance, "there is a desire for community among artists, and a desire to get away from the dominant news story about art, which is 'Damien Hirst sells for £50m'".

Serota added: "At a time of austerity, people are rethinking their values and looking at art that doesn't straightforwardly have a market … Artists want to make work that engages directly with audiences and is not so susceptible to commercial development."

To me this reads as if these curators have never actually been to a performance before or have no idea of what dance and theater do, have been and actually are. In what bizarre universe are curators in 2012 suggesting that "performance proposes a new form of interconnectivity?" How is this new? What the hell do you think we've been doing over here in the performing arts world for the past 50 years? The origins and implications of the visual arts' current infatuation with austerity and non-commodifiable non-object ephemeral art will be explored more fully in a subsequent post. But for now suffice it to say that the article quoted above is representative of visual arts curators' inability to see the performing arts as a form unto itself, with a history and value that exists independently of visual arts markets and contexts.

Before I go any further I want to say that when I started writing the multi-part essay of which this article is a part, I knew I would need help, so I enlisted a research assistant, Buck Wanner, to conduct follow-up fact-finding interviews with various people I spoke to. He also courageously dug deep into Guidestar to find relevant 990s and collate financial data that will be included in a subsequent article.

Since much of the information in these articles came out of casual conversations and, because I am not a journalist, in most cases I will not cite sources. While I trust that the information I received is factual, I do not want to destabilize working relationships between my colleagues. Once I've published this series in its entirety, I hope that a paid journalist or academic with the support of an institution will take this up to either confirm or refute my assertions with resources and rigor that are unavailable to me.

From what I can gather, the museums' level of unpreparedness seems to manifest in various ways from construction of performance facilities to a lack of producing expertise to an inflexible administrative infrastructure that problematizes even the most basic things. That being said, the level of responsiveness varies greatly from institution to institution and curator to curator.

On the construction front, I was talking to a performance curator from California who works for a major museum of modern art that has just begun to build a new performance space. He says he has had to fight tooth and nail to be at the table during the planning and is facing constant challenges in trying to achieve a design that is actually good for presenting performance. Everything from the placement of the lighting booth to the implementation of flexible seating systems has been a challenge.

I was in conversation with a colleague who attended the opening of The Tanks at Tate Modern and spoke with one of the curators who subsequently left for greener pastures. The curator reportedly said that the entire project was fraught with problems and she readily admitted that they had no idea how hard it would be to build a performance space, much less program and manage one.

I've also heard from someone who interviewed for but did not get the gig at the Whitney – thus this is much more speculative – that the design for the Whitney's new performance space is very similar to the space at The New Museum, which is problematic to say the least, given its inadequate lighting system, limited playing space and so on.

And of course Marina Abramovic's Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art is at once oxymoronic and absurd, not to mention designed to look like a traditional theater from the 19th Century.

The performance space of the future is actually a rich area of investigation and imagination and will probably be imagined not by visual arts institutions or even, necessarily, theaters, but rather by technologists, gamers and artists exploring networked performance and telepresence; intuitive, gestural or organic interfaces, augmented reality and transmedia hybrid environments. So there is something quaint and tragic about museums building performance spaces that are neither adequate for the current needs of the field nor scalable for the future. Form the outside one speculates if this is the museum hedging its bets for when the performance trend fades and they can return to using “performance spaces” as lecture halls…. but moving on….

As I mentioned previously, the role of the performance curator in a performing arts institution includes not only selecting artists and developing projects, but serving as a kind of executive producer – overseeing implementation, presentation, fundraising and more. It is a heavy lift and one that, from what I hear, visual arts curators aren’t usually prepared for. One very successful artist who works frequently in both visual art and theater contexts has told me of numerous occasions where he has been invited to make work for a gallery that is surprised to learn that he will need to rehearse and pay his performers and actually load in the technical aspects of the show. And this is where individual attitude and institutional culture make a significant difference.

Everyone I have spoken to has had great things to say about Jay Sanders and his work at the Whitney Biennial. Reports are that he – and the rest of the Whitney team – were open and helpful, worked with them and gave a lot of support in numerous ways including administratively. I am told that The Whitney acted like a true commissioner and worked with the artists to help them realize their visions. That being said, I am told that in general the museum was very much surprised by the cost of things like lighting, dance floor, seating risers, performer fees and administrative costs. I’m told that visual arts commissions never figure in administrative costs, so these commissions didn’t figure that in either. This speaks to systemic cultural differences that we will address a bit later.

I’m also told that little things – like being allowed to have water for dancers in the performance space – became challenges because museums are big institutions with a lot of levels to work through. Obviously they’re nervous about water being near expensive art objects, but at the same time, dancers can’t be expected to die of thirst and exhaustion. So just a simple permission like that became a big administrative process. Or, for instance, one artist chose to use flash paper and burn a cutout image at the end of his performance. Even in a regular performance space that would have been a challenge, but due to the proximity to the art objects and administrative caution, the artist had to get a sizable insurance policy that had a significant impact on their financial bottom line. Still, they worked it out, it all went well and the financial impact of the insurance was deemed a worthwhile investment because of the success of the project and the opportunity to work with the Whitney.

On the other hand, I’m told that MoMA has a much different attitude which is basically, “Here is the budget, make what you can with it,” and that the administrative hurdles to provide even the most basic support make the Whitney’s challenges pale in comparison. Once again things like water, etc. – basic things that are second nature and standard operating procedure to a performing arts presenter – are massive stumbling blocks.

But anecdotal evidence suggests that MoMA’s attitude towards performance is nothing new. I’m told that they will invite European conceptual choreographers to PS1 to present their lecture performance work but rarely their choreography, a privilege for which the artists are only sporadically and inconsistently paid. A curator from a major arts & technology center told me that Klaus and Jenny invited him to a meeting to talk about collaborating but were startlingly ignorant of what it takes to mount that kind of ambitious technological performance and completely unprepared to support it financially or logistically.

And I return to the entire problem of presenting dance in the Atrium at MoMA. From my perspective as an audience member and producer, it looks like a really horrible place to perform. I defer to the artists on this. But as I said before, they keep referring to it as “public” space when it isn’t since you have to pay $25 to get in the museum. It has no lighting to speak of and obstructive traffic patterns, not to mention the constant murmur of the echoing ambient crowd noise emanating from multiple levels. In this way the dance seem to be little more than another exhibit, a moving object to be observed in passing between galleries. Time-based art like dance actually requires time and attention – that’s the point. Placing dance and performance in a transitional space is consistent with Jenny’s assertion that she finds dance

interesting because it allows curators to “re-envision the format of the exhibition.” It would seem that she has little interest in actually paying attention to the work or learning to see dance, rather she just needs something new to bring people into the museum.

I think there is value in bringing dance to a wider audience through MoMA and I appreciate the efforts they are making on some level, but to me it seems a disservice to only offer 30 minute presentations in an atrium space rather than commission a full-scale work (from a self-identified choreographer) that actually occupies and activates the museum. I also think it is interesting that they are so supportive largely of Judson era and Judson-inspired artists and French Conceptualism – practices that not only interrogate more traditional ideas of the form, but also fit more neatly in the visual arts rubric.

Not to digress too much, but when performance curators commission work or invite artists to perform they usually have knowledge of the work and full awareness of what to expect. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’d rather jam hot pokers in my eyes than have to sit through one of Ann Liv Young’s performances, but if you invite someone to your space then you damn well better let them do their thing. Klaus Biesenbach shutting off the lights on Ann Liv at PS1 is a perfect example of being unprepared. If you curate someone, you should know what to expect and you can’t shut it down just because it freaks you out. Unless someone is actually getting hurt or setting fire to the building, you kind of just have to let the artist do their thing. That’s what performance is about sometimes – duration, affront, confounding expectations, challenging social constructs and accepted behaviors. If you’re not ready for the mess, don’t start cooking.

So with these differences in curatorial practice, differing skill sets, knowledge bases and contexts, why aren’t visual arts museums hiring performance curators who actually know performance? It would be one thing if we were still in an era where “visual art performance” was so clearly defined as anti-theater. But now visual artists are directly engaging with dance and theater practices and curators are actively reaching out to choreographers – and sometimes theater artists – to bring their work into the museum. So what’s the deal?

Let’s look at The New Museum for instance. My colleague Travis Chamberlain started working there in September 2007 as the Public Programs Coordinator.

[Full disclosure: I have been a friend of Travis since 2002 when we worked together at Performance Space 122. I deliberately did NOT speak to him for the past few months as I’ve been working on this article so that he will have plausible deniability. The opinions expressed here are my own and do not reflect any recent interaction or conversation between us.]

Since Travis started there he has quietly, steadily and doggedly built an exceptional performance program that, frankly, is generally better and more innovative than those of other museums. He has developed and curated the RE:NEW RE:PLAY residency series that has supported presented work by Jack Ferver, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Young Jean Lee, Jonah Bokaer, Nick Hallett and Lewis Forever, not to mention the extraordinarily influential Keith Hennessy performance that activated and engaged an entire community of young, queer performance makers. He has invited Movement Research into residency to support a whole trove of young dancers and choreographers, connecting them to Judson in a participatory way that is not happening anywhere else in the city.

He has curated the New Museum Presents showcase series, presenting Martha Colburn, Improv Everywhere, Tony Orrico, Narcissister, Kalup Linzy, Dynasty Handbag, Adam Matta, Big Dance Theater, Degenerate Art Ensemble and more.

Travis has actually created a program that engages with and reflects the performance ecology as it is right now, and he does this work with a very strong conceptual underpinning. From what I understand from conversations we’ve had over the years, the RE:NEW RE:PLAY series is about modeling a kind of engagement with artists that museums as institutions of education and research can uniquely offer performing artists and audiences. It places a heightened emphasis on the contextualization of process and production; it supports the creation of new work; generates an open and evolving structure for interdisciplinary discourse (and interdisciplinary audience development); it is both practice-driven and idea-driven, leveraging the strengths of the museum environment to counteract the presenting world’s frequent “premiere-driven” emphasis. Travis’ work as a curator resonates with me personally insofar as it resonates with my ideas on horizontalism by presenting process as public research with the “audience” participating as “research assistants” and, in a sense, co-creators and “embedded critics”. This open, participatory process

is innovative regardless of discipline – visual art, dance, theater, or something else entirely.

But Travis is still, five years later, not technically a curator. It isn't that he's not doing the work – he is. It isn't that he's not thinking about the big ideas or actively innovating the museum – he is. So you'd think that, as an institution, if you had a staff member who was doing exceptional, innovative work that is without peer in the field, you would recognize that person and maybe publicize what he's been doing and how it differs from other museums. But the New Museum hasn't and isn't. Why is that? Well, I am going to speculate that inasmuch as it is about professionalization and qualification, it is ultimately about money. Not salary, but the role a curator plays in determining the value of art.

The origin and evolution of the role of the curator in the art market is a huge topic, one that I've just begun researching in a process that is going to take so long I will have to return to it later in more depth. That being said, in a wonderful incidence of serendipity, a recent edition of The New Yorker featured an article by Rachel Cohen entitled "Priceless: How Art Became Commerce" [subscription required] about the partnership between acclaimed art expert Bernard Berenson and influential art dealer Joseph Duveen. It is a fascinating, insightful read and provides a tantalizing glimpse into a very specific moment in time where the relationships between taste, class, aesthetics, art and business were antagonistically negotiated and tendentiously revealed. It also gave me a starting point in the discussion of who is deemed to have the refinement, knowledge and expertise to assess value.

Suffice it to say that while the role of the contemporary curator in visual arts may be multivalent and complex, one function is certainly the assessment and assignment of value. Since, post-photography, the value of the visual art object is no longer predicated on craft or verisimilitude, some other framework for the determination of value is required. A visual art object rarely, if ever, has any value unto itself beyond the cost of materials and, maybe, the artist's labor. Its value is entirely predicated on how it is presented in the marketplace, the context that has been created for it and the ideas it is said to embody. Since there is rarely an objective standard by which to ascertain value, an expert with a "trained eye" is required to determine an art object's authenticity (not authorship, but authenticity in the vaguer sense of legitimacy as thing-in-itself), its aesthetic value, its novelty and its impact on the field at large. This object also, by the marketplace definition of value, should be if not unique at least limited in quantity and difficult to obtain – it must be scarce. Scarcity exists both as material condition – there is only one object – and aesthetic value: this artist is the only person who can make this special object that is better than and unlike all other objects.

That expert evaluator is the Curator and, like all things pertaining to the creation and distribution of wealth, that evaluator must be highly credentialed to insure the buyer is not screwed, that their speculative investment is most likely to increase in value over time; hence the development of an enormous educational infrastructure to train curators in the assessment and evaluation of art objects. Through extensive education and training curators are taught to imagine or identify new conceptual marketplaces, cultivate producers (artists), commission product (art objects) and then create a value structure that reinforces their determinations. It is, in a way, a kind of beautiful, pristine conceptual art project itself; a sort of experiment in omnipotent capitalist market design, not unlike derivatives.

Of course the whole thing is largely specious, as demonstrated in this hilarious video from The Colbert Report:



However, this is why visual arts curators are required to have advanced degrees, preferably several; why they have such a strong writing practice and why the best curatorial positions are hard to obtain.

They are gatekeepers, market designers and value creators; they are, actually, not too terribly different than program officers at foundations who develop frameworks for the distribution of capital and vet applicants to determine who merits funding and who does not. The difference is that foundations have clearly stated philanthropic missions and guidelines; they have clearly stated goals and program structures that are designed to create very specific outcomes. Museums, on the other hand, tend to be rather vague about all of that.

I return, once again, to Skramstad. No doubt the contemporary museum as institution of education and research has great potential to develop programs for the public good. No doubt there are those both within and without the system that dream of the museum as a place of ideas, a place consistent with the word's origin from the Greek Μουσεῖον (Mouseion) – a place or temple dedicated to the Muses, a building set apart for study and the arts. But from here, from the outside, it seems that the current visual arts world as reflected in most popular museums, has a rather more crass and commercial instinct, one based on commodity and the display of expensive objects.

I want to reiterate – this is an exploration for me and I'm not writing for visual arts people who already know this. I'm writing for performing arts people and other audiences for whom this might be new information.

To me it seems that museum galleries are designed to be indistinguishable from high-end boutiques, the act of wandering a museum gazing at art is not significantly different than walking through Banana Republic – the clean lines, the white walls, the pristine objects. And this is why the museums are in crisis. How do you entice the public to pay an admission fee to come look at your objects when they can go to the mall and do it for free? And in the mall they can actually afford to buy the things they see. Jenny Schlenzka said as much in the Performa event. She stated clearly that museums were in crisis, she was concerned that audiences no longer seemed to be truly engaging with the work on the walls of the galleries and referenced Charlotte Klonk's Spaces of Experience as a starting point for a discussion on exhibit design. What is the role of the exhibition, Schlenzka mused, in this new world? Schlenzka referred to "the dematerialization of labor" – certainly problematic in an institution that is so reflexively hostile to labor – but I would suggest (and will explore in a future post) that it is actually the dematerialization of wealth that is causing the crisis in the museums.

So as I see it, the museums are in crisis over the failure of meaning of the exhibition form and the problems of materiality in the Information Age and Knowledge Economy. They turn to the ephemeral arts of dance, theater and performance for answers which would seem to present an extraordinary opportunity to actually meet artists where they are. This seems like an exceptional opportunity to develop knowledge-sharing and collaborative frameworks where artists of different disciplines and expertise could come together in mutual respect to learn of each other's practices and passions.

Unfortunately, from here, between Performa and MoMA, it seems like the visual arts world is coming to the table with a sense of entitlement and a lack of curiosity in dance and theater writ large, but only in those aspects that fit neatly into the existing museum/visual arts rubric. The resistance to adopting best practices of performance curating and presenting, the resistance to even reaching out to performance curators and producers, suggests a wider indifference to the ecology that supports the creation of new contemporary performance.

But here's the thing: it takes many years – sometimes decades – for artists like Ralph Lemon and Sarah Michelson to develop their choreographic practice and mastery. That development happened in a supportive but underfunded ecosystem. To build a full-scale project with Ralph or Sarah at this point in their careers now can take up to four years, hundreds of thousands of dollars and many, many co-commissioners. This is a massive investment of time, labor and money, not just by the artists, but by the sector collectively. It takes a village to grow an artist and it takes a village to build substantial work.

So it's great that MoMA is supporting 30 minute works by choreographers presented in an atrium. But put MoMA's budget next to Danspace Project's budget and it is like a whale next to a minnow. Yet it is Danspace Project and Movement Research and NYLA and PS122 that are supporting, nurturing and building the next generation of great choreographers and theater artists.

Tino Sehgal was brilliant enough to game the system, but not everyone can be or wants to be a Tino Sehgal. Even Ralph Lemon, in the Performa Event, stated how he

looked forward to the day when people would “collect” the work of choreographers. But when the museums figure out how to “collect” this work and profit from it – will the artists ever see a dime of that money? Will any of those resources “trickle down” to the Danspace Projects of the world, the fecund ecosystem required to grow choreographers and performance makers? Or will it remain an undernourished, struggling garden whose best crops will be harvested by the larger, more well funded visual arts museums?

This is what I plan to explore in greater detail and with numbers in two subsequent essays currently in process entitled “The Economics of Ephemerality” and “Museums and the Crisis of Materiality.”

I hope you will keep reading and join the discussion.

THE ECONOMICS OF EPHEMERALITY



Performance artist Neal Medlyn channels R&B diva Beyonce with his late-night show "The Neal Medlyn Experience." Courtesy of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

***THE ECONOMICS OF EPHEMERALITY**" is one section of a multipart essay I'm writing that examines the relationship between performance and visual art from a variety of perspectives including economics, curatorial practice and cultural ecology. The first article, published on October 11, 2012 was "Panel As Performance: Deconstructing the Performa Event" and the second article, published October 21, 2012, was "Curatorial Practice and Cultural Production". The concluding article, "Museums, Performance and the Crisis of Materiality" is forthcoming. Other previously published and related articles include "Visual Art Performance vs. Contemporary Performance", "On Social Practice and Performance" and "On Attention, Language and Demand".*

PREFACE

After I published "Curatorial Practice and Cultural Production" a friend of mine emailed to say I still sounded hostile and, in the second half of the essay, unhinged. It is really not my intention to sound hostile, and certainly not unhinged; I'm merely trying to describe how things look from my perspective. I want to take this opportunity to remind readers that this is a process of discovery for me. It has been fascinating to realize how naïve, hopeful and idealistic us performance folk are compared to visual art people. When we discover the disturbing truth of the relationship between the visual art marketplace and museum culture – and the cutthroat, cynical, mercenary outlook that results from it – we are shocked. And then we learn that people in that world are not only totally aware of its rapaciousness but frequently find it hilarious – hence Damien Hirst, et al. So most of what I am exploring is not so much about reaching out to visual art people – they are already familiar with my critiques of their ecosystem and are absolutely indifferent to my critiques of their engagement with performance. Mostly I am talking to my audience in the performing arts world and trying to educate them that all of this idealistic talk one might hear about museums and culture and betterment of society is mostly smoke and mirrors.

I think the visual art world's indifference to my writing – and to the existing field of performing arts generally – can be demonstrated by a number of things, three of which I will discuss here.

First is an event that just crossed by desk, The Annual Performance Symposium at MoMA: How Are We Performing Today?. I admit that I was unaware that MoMA had an annual symposium. Maybe this is the first year? But I was dumbfounded to discover that there is not a single, solitary representative of the field of contemporary performance.

The description of MoMA's performance program (which was initiated as recently as 2008 and only as an afterthought add-on to the media department) acknowledges that "Theatrical and staged elements have been a key feature of visual art throughout the 20th century. Movements like Futurism, Dada, and Bauhaus employed theater, dance, music, and poetry with live or broadcast performances to engage with audiences…" Yet they neglect to mention that the artists involved in these movements frequently worked with – or included – actual practitioners of music, theater, dance and poetry, not just visual artists having a lark. For that matter

let's go back just a few decades ago to Duchamp, Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns, currently being explored in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's exhibit "Dancing Around The Bride".

It is not like visual art performance existed in a vacuum. But somehow MoMA couldn't find a single curator, presenter, choreographer, theater maker, live art maker, writer or critic who specializes in contemporary performance. MoMA, are you telling me that there's not a single person in the entire world of contemporary performance that is qualified to be on your panel? *Really?* It's like Mitt Romney's "binders full of women"!

Second, and related, is this totally hilarious and revealing email exchange between my trusty research assistant Buck Wanner and MoMA.

Several years ago a friend of his, a dancer/choreographer/performance artist, applied for an artist membership to MoMA and was denied because she was not, in their eyes, an artist. Given MoMA's recent love affair with performance, we thought we'd see if they'd revised their policy:

On Mon, Oct 22, 2012 at 6:59 PM, [redacted] wrote:

Hi,

I have a question regarding eligibility for the Artist Membership.

I am a practicing dance artist. My own choreography has recently been presented at various important New York City dance venues. I have documentation (publicity postcards, press reviews) from each of these shows. Am I eligible for the Artist Membership at the MoMA? Your website says "Only artists whose discipline is represented in the collection are eligible". So I'm curious if I'm eligible.

Separately, I'm wondering if the dancers who work with me would be eligible for Artist Membership? They have not presented their own choreography, but are certainly creative artists in my work (and they all work with other choreographers as well). Would they be eligible?

Thanks in advance for any clarification you can provide!

Sincerely,

[redacted]

The reply was as follows:

From: *MoMA Membership <membership@moma.org>*

To: *[redacted]*

Date: *Tuesday, 23 October, 2012 11:12AM*

Subject: *Re: Artist Membership Question*

Dear [redacted],

Thank you for your e-mail. In order to apply for the Artist membership, we need to see proof that you have performed in a gallery. This also applies to your dancers. Please let us know if you have any questions regarding memberships. Thank you!

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Department of Membership

The Museum of Modern Art

So I guess dance isn't really art unless it happens in a gallery, or better yet in a museum, and choreographers aren't artists. Stay classy, MoMA!

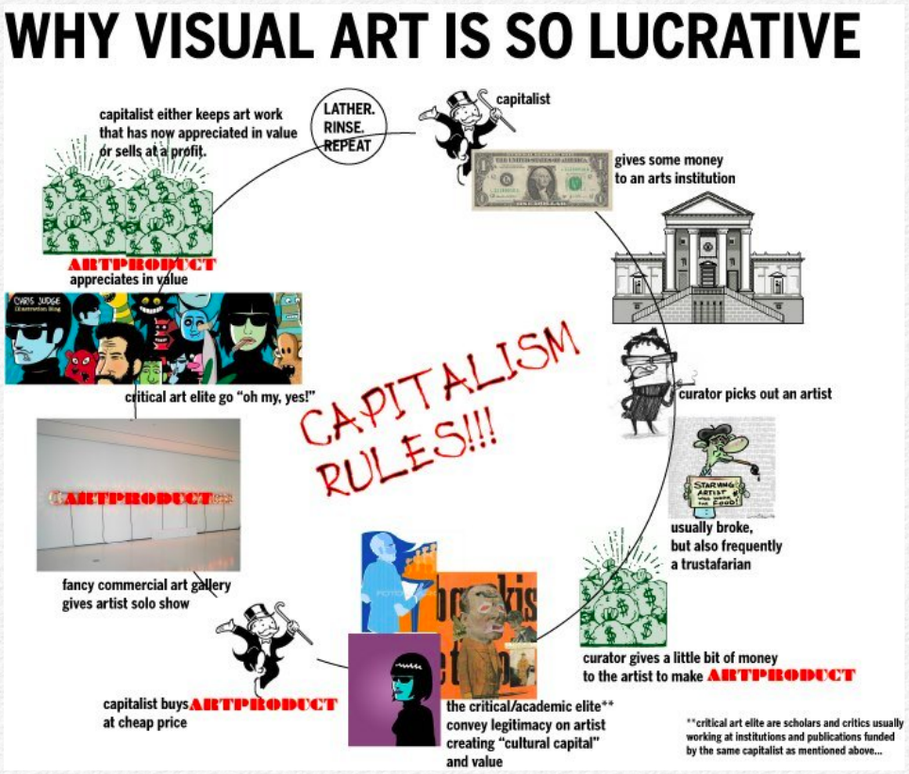
The third way that I know that the visual arts world is almost completely indifferent to and mostly unaware of my writing is that I have received *literally one response* to my last essay from a visual art person. Paul Ramirez Jonas very thoughtfully reached out to say:

> *Ah… the essay would make sense, except you forgot a really important thing: you did not factor that there are galleries, art advisors, collectors, auction houses, art fairs, in short a market that dwarves all our non-profit institutions put together: a market that is not abstract; but has its own institutions, players, memory, etc. Therefore you mis-assign many of the forces shaping the art world to curators and museums. You are right that museums have no idea what they are getting into, you are right that they seem to shun tapping into sources of expertise that have been developed over decades in performance presenting institutions; you might even be right that the art world's interest in dance is shallow and predatory.* ***But you are a victim of the same lack of curiosity towards the art world that you accuse the art world of when you say: "I'm deeply troubled by the lack of curiosity and respect that is being demonstrated" vis a vis art world to dance/performance world.*** *[Emphasis added] Being half right does not make all the assertions in this essay valid.*

Finally, imagine if I were to write an essay about the relationship between curators, the visual arts and performance by discussing the visual arts program of Lincoln Center or even BAM. Imagine how distorted a view that might give me about the situation.

I responded to Paul privately in an email and I want to reiterate my response here.

First, I am well aware that there is a market at play outside the museum, but from where I sit outside the visual art ecosystem, the museum and the market seem deeply and irrevocably intertwined. I've been trying to parse this since at least 2009 when I made and published this humorous and possibly inaccurate graphic:



Second, I want to address the "lack of curiosity" issue, as I believe Paul is creating a false equivalency. I will readily admit to a long and enduring disinterest in visual art. Frankly I think looking at pictures and sculptures is deadly dull stuff. I love history museums, science museums, transit museums, even the Metropolitan Museum of Art insofar as you can see cool stuff from the past – but mostly I have never cottoned

to visual art as a discipline. I enjoy art criticism – like Lawrence Weschler's *Vermeer in Bosnia* that someone recently shared with me – because the writing about art is almost always more interesting than the art itself.

But I have tried to learn about it, I am not incurious. The whole point of this endeavor is to try and parse this situation and engender dialogue. At the same time it is important to note: *I am not trying to make visual art or write critically about the work itself*. The "lack of curiosity" issue is only relevant because the visual arts world seeks to enter or appropriate performing arts forms (or for that matter forms of social and civic practice) without actually learning anything about their long histories and aesthetic concerns, their frameworks, pedagogies or curatorial and production practices. If I were to suddenly start painting with no training whatsoever, all the while completely ignoring centuries of art history and practice and asserted that I was creating a new form and revolutionizing painting, I don't think that would hold water. *That's* the equivalency.

As to Paul's point about visual arts at Lincoln Center or BAM, once again, this is a false equivalency. Lincoln Center and BAM hire visual arts curators to run their programs, visual arts institutions do not hire performing arts curators to run theirs. Also, Lincoln Center and BAM don't make any pretense about the role of the visual arts in their institutions; the art is there, usually, as either supplemental material for a performance or as something in the lobby for people to look at before a show and during intermission. Neither Lincoln Center nor BAM posits the kind of authoritative relationship to visual art that Performa, MoMA, Tate and other museums are attempting to do with performing arts.

All that being said, I thank Paul for reaching out, alone among many, to actually engage in a constructive conversation about these issues and ideas.

And finally, I recognize that there is a big difference between museums, profit-driven galleries and not-for-profit art spaces. In April 2012 Culturebot was included in a group show called Collective/Performative at Exit Art at the invitation of curator Rachel Gugelberger. We wrote about our project, "Ephemeral Evidence", here and here. It was an amazing experience and Rachel, Lauren Rosati, Verity Combe and the rest of the Exit Art team were interested, supportive and engaged. On October 27, 2012 I moderated a panel on Social Practice and the Arts as part of Ping Chong's Undesirable Elements Festival and got to talk with Gonzalo Casals from El Museo Del Barrio and was thrilled to learn about how that institution is grappling with challenges around economies and ecologies, performance, social practice, community engagement and horizontalism.

I recently went to see Richard Maxwell's *Neutral Hero* at The Kitchen. His program notes included an excerpt from Chapter 2 of his forthcoming book, "Theater For Beginners", which should be required reading for all visual artists who want to begin to understand why theater is an art form. Jay Sanders should put Richard in a gallery at MoMA and have him create a social sculpture using that text. (BTW: The Kitchen got ruined by Hurricane Sandy to the tune of $500K. Every year at this time, The Kitchen hosts a benefit art auction, the proceeds from which are essential to their program and operations. Originally slated for November 12, the event will now take place on November 26, either on The Kitchen site or at an alternative location to be determined. The importance of this occasion today cannot be overstated. If you've got some extra cash to send their way, it would be much appreciated.)

So, let's begin.

ON THE ECONOMICS OF EPHEMERALITY

My investigation of this business of "The Black Box vs. The White Cube" began innocently enough when I curated the Prelude Festival in 2008. (Download PDF of Festival Catalog here.)

I worked at Performance Space 122 from 2002 – 2007 and I didn't really think much about context. In 2005 RoseLee Goldberg presented the first Performa and I covered the press launch for Culturebot. It was fascinating to me, a world I knew little about, and I subsequently talked to RoseLee, read her book (okay, *skimmed* her book), attended some performances and started to dig in to the history and frameworks of visual art performance.

In 2006 PS122 co-presented Coco Fusco's "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America" with Creative Time and back then I thought it was just another middling work of performance art that valued idea over implementation. But being at PS122 I didn't differentiate between dance, theater, performance, etc. The museums weren't doing performance back then (with the exception of Whitney Live which, I think, was discontinued when Altria cut the funding). When I thought of

"performance art" as a discipline I was generally underwhelmed. I received the entire genre in the vein of Allan Kaprow or Chris Burden or Ron Athey, Franco B. or any of the myriad performance artists whose work rejected dance or theater, was predicated on ephemeral events in the here and now and existed outside the practice of performing arts as we had heretofore defined it. To me it was marginally interesting work but not terribly compelling.

But by 2008 my pal Travis Chamberlain had started at the New Museum and started programming artists I knew. I was fascinated at how the work of an artist like Neal Medlyn could be so radically re-evaluated by the museum context. I have known Neal for years and used to see his work at places like Collective Unconscious, Surf Reality and all kinds of weird dumpy dives on the LES before it got gentrified. I had tried to get him a gig at PS122 but to no avail. Then Travis gave him a gig at New Museum and not only was he exposed to a whole new audience but all of a sudden a guy in underwear acting crazy and lip syncing to divas while throwing glitter and dancing with dildos and black light unicorn paintings was not just another Downtown Art Star (a la Reverend Jen) but a bona fide transgressive performance artist deconstructing gender roles through a critique of consumerism. I was amazed at the power of the museum and that Fall I convinced my colleagues at The Prelude Festival to investigate this.

Even with all the Tino Sehgal hubbub from The New Museum in 2008 and The Guggenheim in 2010, this thing about context, the power of the museum and its relationship to the valuation of performance didn't really start to get under my skin until my friend Nick Hallett invited me to see Shana Moulton's *Whispering Pines* at The Kitchen in April, 2010. As I wrote then:

> *… the theater person in me gets a little riled up sometimes by visual art performance because it seems to assume that performance is easy. Performing – even experimental, weirdo performance art – is hard to do in a compelling way. And Whispering Pines really proved that. The musicians were top-notch professionals bringing an extraordinary level of musicianship and prowess to the proceedings. It is a shame that Ms. Moulton didn't work with a choreographer on her movement – or, as the artist, hire an actor/dancer to play the role of Cynthia. I didn't see a dramaturgical imperative for autoperformativity. If the video is, by choice, exploring the high tech/low tech divide, then everything else should be decidedly accomplished. Big Art Group, for instance, hires top-notch performers to bring the work to life. I get it, you know, that the artist is "saying something" by being in their own work and that her artlessness is part of the aesthetic. I just think that it is one thing to have a performer play at artlessness and another thing to embody it.*

It really started to nag at me. How is it possible for an artist to make a work with unremarkable writing, amateurish video, unconscionably bad choreography all anchored by an artless performance by a non-charismatic performer that gets presented to rapturous audiences and critical acclaim at The Kitchen? I was confounded and said as much. Nick tells me that Shana later engaged a director and the work improved accordingly. I haven't seen it, but I trust Nick.

Now, I've met Shana socially and she's lovely and I quite like her object-based work. I'd say that most of the visual artists I meet – and writers and curators – are cool, interesting, well-meaning people. With the possible exception of Klaus Beisenbach who I've only met for a moment and who seems to be the very model of a modern major EuroDouche, and Claire Bishop who I have also only met in passing and who, frankly, intimidates the hell out of me, I can say I've genuinely enjoyed the company of many people in the visual art world. So this isn't personal in that sense.

It is personal in the sense that I couldn't then – and can't now – abide this deliberate lack of craft and rigor, this willful ignorance of the fundamentals of performance and stagecraft, this refusal to work with people who actually know what they're doing. It is one thing to intentionally break the rules of performance, it is quite another to not know what the hell you're doing.

What is problematic to me is that bad performance by visual artists gets critical praise – and by extension raises that artist's value in the marketplace – while great work by performing artists, when it is acknowledged by the visual arts world at all, is used either to get people into a museum or is appropriated, re-purposed and re-contextualized.

I have been accused of being hostile, unhinged and incurious. I'm not. I just look at how difficult it is to make dance and theater; how much training, skill, craft, creativity and ingenuity it requires, and I want to promote the valuation of performance as an art form unto itself, different from but equal to visual art. And when I look at the numbers and the ecologies of these two worlds I feel compelled to illustrate the systemic differences and economic disparities that perpetuate inequality.

For instance, let's talk commissioning. In the performing arts – and dance especially – the timeline for fundraising is about 1.5 to 2 years. An artist has to start fundraising at least that long before the premiere and most artists working on the level of Sarah Michelson, Miguel Gutierrez, Dean Moss, etc. spend 12-18 months making a piece. So you're looking at a really long, expensive creation process.

I am told that Ralph Lemon's most recent major work "*How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?*" took four years and over $500K to develop, a process that included multiple funders, commissioners, residency opportunities and more. Alyssa Alpine wrote about this on Culturebot in October 2010, and here are the funding credits from the producer's website:

> *How Can You Stay has received funding support from: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; The MAP Fund, a program of Creative Capital supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation; Doris Duke Fund for Dance of the National Dance Project, a program administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts with funding from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and MetLife Foundation; National Endowment for the Arts; New York State Council on the Arts; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; Bossak/Heilbron Charitable Foundation.*
>
> *It was co-commissioned by Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York; Krannert Center for the Performing Arts/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; On the Boards, Seattle, WA; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.*

How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere? was developed in part during a creative residency provided by the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography at The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL. It was also developed through creative and production residencies provided by Brooklyn Academy of Music, Walker Art Center, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts and the Kitchen.

And that's before it even tours, not including presentation costs, travel, etc. That's very resource and labor intensive.

Another reason the development process for performance is long, apart from funding, is that making dance and theater is very, very different from creating objects. There are so many collaborators involved and, especially with dance, you have to rehearse and develop the choreography, which can include a lot of trial and error; you have to repeat the movement with the dancers endlessly to get it into their bodies until it is second nature; a composer must create the score, a designer the lights, not to mention set, costumes and a myriad of other details that, once created, must be coordinated and implemented for the premiere. And then toured.

Another significant difference is that in performing arts the funding model is mostly project-based. From what I understand, visual artists generally don't apply for grants for a specific show or project. They get grants based on their stature and merit of their work, so they can apply for grants at any time, and make their work whenever they have the money available. I'm told that the NEA, before the culture wars, also funded artists this way, but now most funders require performing artists to apply with

a specific show at a specific venue for a specific time. They get funding to support the creation of specific works, not general funding that allows them to simply *work*. That is a huge difference both in way of working and in the economy of creativity.

So in order to build a major new work from a dance or theater artist it is necessary to organize a consortium of commissioners, all of whom are putting in money at the beginning of the process, supporting the development for multiple years and also committing to produce and present the work once it is built. They frequently have to fundraise both individually and together as well as identify developmental residencies and so forth. And at the end, there is no way that ticket sales at any given venue – or even for a whole tour – could possibly recoup the expenses. On an insider-y, tangentially related note, that is why if a project goes off the rails, no-one wants to say it failed. Too many people have invested too much time and money to be able to publicly acknowledge that, for whatever reason, this project didn't quite work. This can make the field risk-averse, but that's another topic for another time.

Now, I know that museums can take two or three years to develop an exhibition, but I don't know if it takes that long for the artists in the exhibition to make the work. My limited experience with visual art is that artists can usually turn things around pretty quickly and unless you're Richard Serra or Christo, it isn't insanely expensive. Also, I don't know exactly how it works in museums or galleries, but I'm pretty sure that the institutions don't go out of pocket for the work. I think that when a museum commissions a work, they are actually buying it – they own it – so if it appreciates in value they can sell it, or just by virtue of owning it, the value of their collection increases as the art appreciates in value. A commission, then, is an investment, not purely an expenditure.

So if we look specifically at Sarah Michelson for example, I'm told that the commission offers from both the Whitney and MoMA came too late to get worked into the funding cycle. The Whitney offer came seven months prior to premiere and the MoMA offer came six months prior to premiere. Not only is this a really short lead time for a choreographer of Sarah's stature to create a work, it makes it nearly impossible to apply for other funding to support the work's creation.

I'm also told that The Whitney commission only covered about 50% of the budget of "Devotion" (the scaled down version they presented as opposed to the full version at The Kitchen) and that the MoMA commission was only 20% of the Whitney's. Which means that MoMA's commission only covered 10% of the budget. Ouch.

But artists in all disciplines do these things – work at a loss – because of the esteem, approbation and status conveyed by the institution. The difference is that the market value of a performing artist's future work doesn't appreciate the way that the market value of a visual artist's future work will, whether object-based or ephemeral like Tino Sehgal. To me this reveals a significant conundrum – how does one create material value around the ephemeral, attracting capital to the performing arts without inherently compromising the meaning of the work itself (as with Sehgal)? And if we can create that value, how can we develop a structure that will direct that capital into the ecology that supports the development and creation of new work, not to mention nurturing new generations of artists?

As far as I know when the Whitney commissioned Richard Maxwell and Sarah Michelson no object-based evidence or documentation of the ephemeral performance was added to the Whitney's collection. Certainly their work was neither "acquired" in the traditional sense nor for what one imagines to be a comparable sum. I don't know if this is how a museum or Biennial works or if the question was even discussed and I'm happy to be enlightened. Generally I think the Whitney Biennial was asking some thoughtful questions and through juxtaposition provided a platform for the kind of transdisciplinary conversations that many artists I know are eager to have.

MoMA, with "Some Sweet Day", doesn't seem to be asking questions at all. MoMA's proposition seems mostly about new strategies to increase audiences without any kind of legitimate, thoughtful inquiry into the form of dance. They knew enough to ask Ralph Lemon to curate but not enough to actually present the work in a meaningful way. And as much as I'm happy that these great choreographers got to widen their audiences and gain visibility, I'm concerned about the way MoMA has done it. Ralph's program includes work from an astonishing array of innovative, talented, even iconic, choreographers including Steve Paxton, Jérôme Bel, Faustin Linyekula, Dean Moss, Deborah Hay and Sarah Michelson, and MoMA just didn't know what to do with them. I wasn't at the talkback after Steve Paxton's performance but I heard from reliable sources that Sabine mostly demonstrated her absolutely cluelessness about dance and that none of the questions really dug into Paxton's revolutionary

impact on re-imagining what dance is and how it is created and performed – not to mention the radical political resonance of his approach to choreography, dance and embodiment.

In my previous essay "Curatorial Practice and Cultural Production", I outlined the inherent challenges and implicit de-valuation of the form by presenting the work of such esteemed choreographers in a noisy, transitional space between galleries with inadequate sound and lighting; a space erroneously designated "public" when audiences must pay a $25 admission fee, a space that is not conducive to the kind of attention demanded by contemporary dance.

To begin with, each choreographer was invited to perform for 30 minutes. Bel presented 30 minutes of his stunning 90-minute work "The Show Must Go On", Paxton presented excerpts of iconic full-length works and I'm not sure what the rest did, but I've seen full-length work by Moss, Linyekula, Hay and Michelson in other contexts and none of them ever clock in at under 60 minutes, usually closer to 90 or 120. This time limit is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, it just demonstrates what the museum intends – dance is welcome as long as the artists repackage the work into consumer-friendly 30-minute segments – like television. Ironically, at the Performa Event in September Jenny Schlenzka asserted that she is interested in dance because it helps her "re-envision the exhibition" – but MoMA's approach to presenting dance, if anything, reinforces the current, tired exhibition model. If they want to challenge or re-envision the exhibition model through performance, this isn't doing it. They need to interrogate their processes, structures and aesthetic propositions a little more rigorously.

So here we have a situation where the museum purports to be interested in dance, purports to want to support dance and inquiry into the form's artistic practice and engagement with visual art, yet invests comparatively little money or resources in commissioning or presenting the work. And neither MoMA, The Whitney or the Guggenheim for that matter, have made any attempt to engage existing performing arts institutions that regularly support the artists that they are presenting. Even The Kitchen doesn't consider itself aligned with other presenters. Maybe briefly under Elise Bernhardt, but certainly not under Debra Singer and now under Tim Griffin. Generally, The Kitchen holds itself aloof from the rest of the sector. I'm sure there's a reason that goes back to the origin stories of the various institutions, but we'll explore that some other time.

Once again, if museums aren't reaching out to performing arts presenters, this isn't really a big deal – or is it? The ecosystem that supports the development of dance artists is resource-poor. As I mentioned in my previous essay, it takes a village to grow a great choreographer or theater director or ensemble. It takes a large, intertwined, interdependent network of institutions to collaborate and invest time, money and labor over many years. Artists enter the system at Dixon Place or Movement Research at Judson and then over the course of the next 10-15 years they grow from the smaller spaces to PS122 and Danspace Project, NYLA, The Kitchen and maybe, maybe, one day, BAM. *Maybe*. It's a lot of time, money and labor – not just on the part of the artist but the entire ecosystem. So let's compare/contrast by looking at the numbers my research assistant Buck pulled from the 990s on Guidestar. All data is from 2010 or the most recent available 990 at the time the research was conducted.

MoMA's total annual budget in 2010 was $467 million, of which $51 million was spent on the acquisition of artworks. I have no idea who makes those decisions or who gets the money – artists, dealers, collectors? – but that is serious money. Given MoMA's professed interest in dance they might want to look at investing a little in the artists and commission full-scale work. Salary-wise Klaus Biesenbach makes $215,000 for his gig as Director of PS1 and Chief Curator at Large at MoMA. Sabine Breitwieser, who heads up the media and performance art department at MoMA, earned a relatively modest $115,000. (Maybe that's why she's heading to Salzburg?) Not bad.

The Whitney's total annual budget in 2010 was $231 million and their chief curator, Donna DeSalvo, brought home $273,000. I don't know what a non-chief curator makes but Klaus at MoMA should ask for a raise, I guess.

Before everyone piles on, I know that Lincoln Center and BAM are more "apples to apples" size-wise. I'm not saying that there aren't big, well-funded arts institutions that pay their curators and executives big salaries. But Lincoln Center and BAM also spend a lot of money commissioning and presenting new work from performing artists, especially BAM. More importantly and to the point, The Whitney and

especially MoMA are drawing dance and theater artists from an ecosystem that is drastically smaller by comparison.

The choreographers who were part of "Some Sweet Day" and the kind of choreographers that museums are interested in generally – French conceptualists, Judson era icons, contemporary dance makers with striking visual sensibilities – come out of an ecosystem defined by The Kitchen and Danspace Project with NYLA, PS122, The Chocolate Factory, Movement Research and the American Realness Festival in close orbit. Just to give you a sense of proportion, as of 2010 Danspace Project's budget was $1.3M, The Kitchen's $2.6M and DTW (now NYLA) $4.5M. I don't want to embarrass anybody but of the institutions mentioned above the compensation for curators/artistic directors ranged from a low of $35K to a high of Debra Singer's $149K in 2010 at The Kitchen. That being said, Debra was both Executive Director *and* Chief Curator, where an Executive Director at a big museum can make upwards of $400K.

I'm not going to go into the issue of artist pay – that's a much bigger problem and a whole other essay. We hope to partner with W.A.G.E. to conduct research in our sector over the next year. What I'm trying to illustrate is a situation where the ecology that supports the development and creation of new works of dance and theater is underfunded and under-resourced. It has a history, a body of knowledge and theory, specific practices, values and aesthetics. These forms require training, education and the development of specific skills and expertise to create thoughtful, investigative, high quality work. Similarly presenting the work requires specific skills, training, education and knowledge. Therefore it is a problem when the visual art world or museums choose to allocate resources to support self-identified visual artists making bad performance and it is a problem when the museum or the visual art sector plucks up good artists out of this underfunded ecosystem without putting anything back into it. In all likelihood, if the visual art world figures out how to create market value around performance, they will inevitably figure out a way to insure that the capital goes to them, not to the artist and not to the performing arts ecosystem that they already refuse to acknowledge even exists.

To illustrate this I want to change disciplines and turn to theater for a moment. The last time I brought up Creative Time's production of Paul Chan's project *Waiting For Godot In New Orleans* I was roundly lambasted and told to read Shannon Jackson's essay on the *Godot* project in "Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics". I did read it and I also had the great good fortune to meet with Professor Jackson while in Portland for the TBA Festival. She is amazingly smart and cool. It is a genius essay and a thoughtful, provocative book. But I still think Jackson lets Creative Time off the hook for what appears to be a deeply problematic structure for a meritorious project. I'm sure *Waiting For Godot In New Orleans* was artistically excellent and am reasonably certain it had a positive impact: I'm not impugning the project, the motives or the people involved.

As much as I want to address what I see as the inherent problems of socially engaged art practice in the visual arts, as much as I am frustrated that the visual arts sector won't engage theater and dance artists who have developed best practices and methodologies for community engagement and social practice, I will defer that larger conversation to focus on the specific problematic relationship between visual art and theater and its implications as embodied by Creative Time's production of Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot In New Orleans* project.

First – a disclaimer. I have heard from many people that Paul Chan is a stand-up guy, deeply committed to his politics and I'm hoping to get to meet him – friends have offered to introduce me. I've heard only kind things about Nato Thompson and Anne Pasternak, their support for artists, etc. etc. I've never had occasion to meet either of them, so this isn't a personal thing. For that matter I haven't been able to get in touch with director Christopher McElroen or anyone from Classical Theatre of Harlem who was involved in the project. Once again, this is a systemic analysis from the outside looking in. Since I am not a journalist, in most cases I have not cited sources. While I trust that the information I have received is factual, I do not want to destabilize working relationships between my colleagues or impugn anybody's reputation. I'm just a working guy trying to figure some stuff out and I'm hopeful that a paid journalist or academic with the support of an institution will take this up to either confirm or refute my assertions with resources and rigor that are unavailable to me.

In her essay Jackson addresses the different modes of cultural production at work in visual art and theater, and she forthrightly addresses the challenges curator Nato Thompson faced in learning to be a producer, a role outside of traditional visual arts curatorial practices:

> *As someone with a background in political organizing, Thompson also came equipped with skill sets that exceed the traditional skill sets of curatorship and hence are transferable to the kind of human mobilization and project management necessary for pieces whose social engagement require durations, embodiments, temporalities, group interaction, and pre- and post-production processes that exceed traditional museumship…*

and

> *With the move to Creative Time and to Paul Chan's project, Thompson found himself testing the degree to which curatorship has become a kind of stage management, a mobilization of bodies in space over time. For Thompson, a curator was "kind of like a therapist between the artist and production, the pragmatics, permits, social organizing." While that mobilization was something that Thompson knew aesthetically and politically, the specificities of theatre's forms of mobilization were new. "I was trying to figure out my role. I can't do theatre but I can do the social organizing."*

Jackson also addresses the culture clash in negotiating the relationship between Classical Theater of Harlem and Creative Time, writing:

> *It was in the process of working through contractually, logistically, and aesthetically what such a remount meant that the occupational habits of the theatre world and the art world had their first confrontation. In fact, says Thompson, "It took us a while to realize that we were doing theatre."*

Jackson alludes to the fact that it is problematic that a well-funded visual arts project imported by New Yorkers carries such outsized presence, weight and perceived impact in comparison to the legitimate efforts of local stakeholders. But I think there's a meta-issue at play here and I only bring this up because of how Creative Time positions itself as a progressive, leftist, socially engaged commissioner of activist art interrogating the status quo. If that is who they are, then they should be considering their values in relation to how they treat artists of other disciplines and to the capitalist frameworks of their production practices. I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds CT deeply situated in the visual art market economy and who finds it confounding that, without any apparent sense of irony or self-awareness, they organized this year's Creative Time Summit around "Confronting Inequity".

In 2007, the year *Godot* was produced, Creative Time's budget was $2.65M and Anne Pasternak made $140K. That same year the Classical Theatre of Harlem's annual budget was $550,000 and the artistic director was unpaid. Over the years CTH has filed a 990-EZ form, which doesn't have as much information as a full 990, but it seems that ***at least 80% of its budget goes to productions rather than salaries or administrative costs***. In 2009 Creative Time's budget went down to $2.2M, probably as a result of the crash in 2008, but Pasternak's salary went to $220K. The point being that in 2009 CTH's budget also went down – from 2007's $550K to $380K, still with no salary for the artistic director and still directing about 80% of its income to producing work. So from the beginning there was significant economic disparity between the two organizations, not to mention a disparity in access to cultural capital.

A picture is worth a thousand words, so here is one of the CT 2012 gala, a 500-seat banquet at Roseland where individual tickets are $1250 and tables *start* at $10K, for which you get to hobnob with the likes of Courtney Love, Cindy Sherman, Donna Karan and Andre Balazs:



Oh, and here's a picture of the Classical Theatre of Harlem gala:



Oh wait, ***I can't find a picture because they don't have a gala***.

If you feel that this is "apples to oranges", let's look at a more "apples to apples" scenario, let's look at The Kitchen, an institution of comparable size and artistic quality. Creative Time produces roughly 6 projects per year, whereas The Kitchen produces work all year long, including affordable performances, free lectures and gallery shows across all disciplines. It also has a building to maintain (currently damaged by Hurricane Sandy to the tune of $500K, see mention above on how to help) a significant staff and the considerable overhead that comes with all of that. (NB: The affordable ticket price at The Kitchen is a deliberate choice. I talked to Debra Singer years ago and she told me that the earned income from tickets was so negligible that she chose to keep prices low and just make up the difference with increased fundraising efforts.) So one can imagine that running an organization of that size as combined ED and Chief Curator would be a herculean task, yet The Kitchen's highest executive salary (as of 2010) was considerably lower than CT's. Also, according to the W.A.G.E. survey, while Creative Time did reasonably well on paying artists for their work (87.5% were paid vs. 12.5% who were not), the Kitchen got a remarkable 100% rating for paying artists.

But ultimately this isn't about executive salaries or even, necessarily, organizational culture and fancy fundraisers. This is about valuation of art, labor and economic equality.

Creative Time's production of Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot In New Orleans* ***could not have existed*** without a production of *Waiting For Godot*, preferably an African-American one that already referenced Katrina. Chan and Thompson knew they didn't know how to make theater – and acknowledged as much – so they outsourced the heart of their project to people that did know how to produce theater, who in fact had a ready-made production that was a perfect fit: Classical Theatre of Harlem.

There are at least two systemic issues at play here. First, there's the fact that no funder in the world would support a socially engaged theater production of *Waiting For Godot* in New Orleans by a small, Harlem-based theater company with a $500K budget. Despite the fact that CTH, by its very existence and mission, is a socially engaged project, in it for the long haul, committed to creating community and well-deserving of funding, I can't imagine them being able to raise the money to go to New Orleans on their own. I don't know what the CT budget was, but I can guesstimate what it costs to ship an Equity show to New Orleans under those conditions and produce it and do all the community engagement lead-up. Let me tell you there's not a chance in hell a theater company would ever get that kind of

support and I'm confident that if you talk to any theater or dance companies that do this kind of work on a regular basis, they will attest to that.

Secondly, given CTH's economic status and speculating on the resources they must have expended to create their original production of *Godot* relative to their total operating budget, it seems unlikely that they were in a position to negotiate an equitable deal with Creative Time. Given how resource-poor CTH is and that theatrical productions generally have a short life span, given that they had little or no chance of recouping their initial investment through ticket sales, merchandising or any other revenue streams, CTH was probably thrilled to earn some income and revive the work, thankful for the publicity and excited for a chance to make a difference in New Orleans.

But from outside it seems like their deal was not unlike what happens when people appear on television – they signed away creative control, control of the narrative and – as far as I can tell – any rights to future income or revenue from their work. I'd be delighted to be proven wrong.

The real issue here insofar as the relationship of visual art to dance and theater is that the work (both creative and labor) of performing artists is, in practice and in theory, deemed to have little or no value. Creative Time, in order to realize Paul Chan's project, purchased CTH's *Waiting For Godot*, put a frame around it, called it its own and sold the art, as Jackson suggests, like a DuChamp "ready-made". The project page on the CT website doesn't mention CTH at all and even the project mini-site mentions CTH only in passing. In case you think I'm just being uninformed, hostile and unhinged, Jackson as much as states that CT's production of Chan's project is inherently a part of the visual art marketplace:

> *Paul Chan's theatre was also implicitly funded by the remaining individuated structures of the speculative art market in which Paul Chan sells. Limited edition documentation of Waiting for Godot in New Orleans was available for sale at Greene Naftali; the cart (and "tree") made by plasticien/Master Carpenter Paul Chan was sold as sculpture.*

So who got the money for the art objects created – the limited edition documentation, the cart and the tree? I'm genuinely asking and would love to hear that it was going back to New Orleans. For that matter CT still sells $45 books about the project on their website. Does any of that money go into the shadow fund created for Katrina victims and rebuilding New Orleans (created at Chan's behest, from what I'm told, not at CT's initiation)? Does CTH see any ongoing revenue from their absolutely essential contribution to the realization of the project?

Here's the thing, and it is emblematic of the relationship between visual art and performing arts and the heart of why I'm so focused on this issue. Duchamp wrote on a urinal and called it art. **But CTH's production of *Godot* is not a urinal**. It was already art – *great* art, a fully developed work of art; a product of exceptional creativity, imagination and skilled labor that existed previously in a separate but equal ecosystem to the CT project. Classical Theatre of Harlem's *Waiting For Godot* is art; one can easily contextualize Beckett's work as a progenitor of time-based art in its interrogation of theatrical convention, a living art object which engages fundamental questions of existence, environment, time, duration, embodiment, the failure of language and social systems; McElroen's conception of the work is art and the work that actors and designers do is art as well and it has value. Let me say it one more time:

Theater and Dance are Art.

Ralph Lemon, Steve Paxton, Jérôme Bel, Faustin Linyekula, Dean Moss, Deborah Hay and Sarah Michelson all make Art. DD Dorvillier makes Art. Meg Stuart makes Art. Richard Maxwell, Young Jean Lee, Temporary Distortion, Forced Entertainment, Ant Hampton all make Art. It is art that exists in both space and time and is created collaboratively with other artists. Visual designers like Thomas Dunn and Jennifer Tipton and countless others, often with visual art backgrounds, make art out of light, fabric and materials whose existence is as ephemeral as the performance. Sound artists like Hahn Rowe, Alex Waterman, Ben Rubin and many, many others, all make art that requires extensive study, training, knowledge, skill, craft, creativity and innovation. And it may not look like it but what actors and dancers do is incredibly difficult and complicated and unfathomably creative. It looks easy because they're really, really good at it and they have a gift that they have labored long and hard to hone and develop. It is not traditionally intellectual in the way that contemporary

visual artists must use writing to justify their work – it is an art practice that exists in and is expressed through the body. And it is frequently extraordinary.

My point being that CT's appropriation of CTH's *Godot* is not so different than MoMA, with its massive resources, buying and repackaging dance product at a discount for its Atrium to freshen up its exhibition strategies and add a veneer of liveness and novelty to a mostly stale institution. (And also marking it up. It costs $25 to get into MoMA but you can see full-length, fully-produced work by pretty much all the artists in "Some Sweet Day" for $18 or less in their original venues.)

If the visual art world – and museums specifically – would open up their perspective just a little bit and acknowledge that what certain dance and theater artists do is art, albeit with different practices, frameworks and modes of production, we might be able to have a real conversation. If visual art people were open to receiving new information and perspectives, not just recycled ideas from within their echo chamber of self-reinforcing narratives, we might be able to have a real conversation. If they acknowledged that performance curators actually know what they're doing and talking about, we might be able to have a conversation. And just as importantly, if we could have a real conversation, then maybe the "crisis in the museum" around materiality, exhibitions and audiences, the challenges visual art is facing around socially engaged practice, the challenges faced by visual artists trying to make work they are unequipped to actually create, there might be a possibility for collaboration and cooperation, even a two-way exchange of ideas, skills and frameworks.

Within our own world, within the short span of my own career as an arts administrator, I have seen a sector that is excited by the questions that visual artists pose when approaching performance and the possibilities those questions open up. More surprisingly, I have seen the field of contemporary performance move significantly from a framework of competition to practical collaboration. It would be amazing to see these trends happen across sectors, disciplines and between institutions.

I'm not holding my breath, but we'll be here.

Panel As Performance: The Danspace Conversations on Some Sweet Day



Ralph Lemon at Danspace Project (Photo: Ian Douglas)

Saturday I spent the afternoon over at Danspace Project for their Conversations Without Walls dedicated to Ralph Lemon's "Some Sweet Day" platform at MoMA. It was very revealing and I'm really glad I went. The conversations revealed some very problematic stuff that clarified exactly how wide the gulf is between worlds, but also some indications of ways to move forward towards meaningful collaboration. The conversations also provided some great insight into the program itself, outside of the "dance in the museum" issue. If you'd like to listen to the conversations (and I suggest you do as I can't possibly cover it all here) I recorded the event and it is available here:

DEAR READERS –

I AM SORRY BUT I DIDN'T CLEAR THE RECORDING RIGHTS WITH DANSPACE AND HAVE BEEN ASKED TO TAKE THE RECORDINGS DOWN. I WONDER IF THAT MEANS IF I TOOK PICTURES WITH MY PHONE OR IN OTHER WAYS DOCUMENTED THE EVENT AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN WHO PAID ADMISSION TO ATTEND AN EVENT THAT I AM NOT ALLOWED TO SHARE MY DOCUMENTATION? SINCE IT WAS NOT AN ARTISTIC EVENT BUT RATHER A PUBLIC FORUM IT RAISES INTERESTING QUESTIONS REGARDING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, TRANSPARENCY AND EXPECTATIONS OF PRIVACY. ANYWAY, I APOLOGIZE TO DANSPACE FOR BUMMING THEM OUT BUT MORESO TO CULTUREBOT READERS WHO WERE UNABLE TO ATTEND THE EVENT AND ARE NOW UNABLE TO HEAR THE DISCUSSION WHICH WAS EXTREMELY INTERESTING AND INFORMATIVE.

-ANDY

The conversation was divided into three parts, all moderated by Jenn Joy:

Part One: Regarding Steve Paxton's Satisfyin Lover and Jérôme Bel's The Show Must Go On:
Conversation with Sabine Breitwieser (Chief Curator, Media and Performance Art, MoMA), George Ferrandi (artist), Maria Hassabi (choreographer), and Noémie Solomon (Mellon post-doctorate fellow, McGill University, Montreal).

Part Two: Regarding Faustin Linyekula's What is Black Music, Anyway… Self-Portraits and Dean Moss's Voluntaries, and Kevin Beasley's I Want my Spot Back:
Conversation with Thomas J. Lax (Exhibition Coordinator and Program Associate, The Studio Museum in Harlem), Ralph Lemon, Katherine Profeta (dramaturg) and Jenny Schlenzka (Associate Curator, MoMA PS1).

Part Three: Regarding Sarah Michelson's Devotion Study #3 and Deborah Hay's Blues:
Conversation with Luciana Achugar (choreographer), DD Dorvillier (choreographer), Thomas J. Lax (Exhibition Coordinator and Program

Associate, The Studio Museum in Harlem), Ralph Lemon, and Rashaun Mitchell (choreographer).

I'm going to start with the negative stuff before I get to the positive, and yes, it is nit-picky but it is really only one overarching criticism that umbrellas a number of other issues that I won't go into here. Okay, so, the event was billed like this:

> *In collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Danspace Project presents a conversation responding to* ***Ralph Lemon****'s MoMA commissioned series Some Sweet Day (October 15-November 4, 2012). Danspace Project invites artists, curators, and scholars to respond to the aesthetic and historic dialogue proposed by Some Sweet Day performances.*

I really don't see how it is a "collaboration" when MoMA didn't publicize the event, include it on their website, email, twitter, Facebook or otherwise promote to their rather substantial constituency. One would think that if MoMA went to the trouble of commissioning and presenting the work and, one assumes, thinking about the implications of dance in the museum and the important issues Ralph raised in his platform, that they would want to promote a conversation either in their museum or outside of it. Since they didn't choose to include this level of conversation as part of the actual platform at MoMA (artist talkbacks are one thing, but not necessarily sufficient unto themselves), it would have been a nice gesture to reach out to their visitors, some of whom might have encountered this work without any context, and invited them to learn about the work after the fact. Just sayin'.

That being said, I got a lot of new and valuable information that will inform my writing as I develop the fourth installment of my essay series. It is currently titled "Museums, Performance and the Crisis of Materiality" and will explore just that. We'll touch on some of this here, lightly, to be explored more deeply in the subsequent essay. Also, let me re-emphasize that I can't possibly recapitulate all that was said in these conversations, so I encourage you to listen to them using the media player above.

The first thing I found out – which was not surprising but I hadn't considered – is that MoMA is diversity-challenged. That is to say they haven't really featured the work of very many African-American artists, particularly solo exhibitions, and that part of the original impetus behind this dance platform was as a companion project to an exhibition on blues that never came together. Ralph's "prompt" to the invited choreographers was (and I paraphrase) "What is Black Music?". Paxton and Bel chose not to really follow the prompt. The other four choreographers did in different ways, raising different levels of challenge to the prompt, the audiences and the performers. Ralph chose to de-emphasize the prompt in the expository material developed for the platform, feeling that it would complicate matter too much and serve as a distraction. If I understood correctly, he proposed that race and blackness was an activating material for the work, but not the entire focus of the platform. Still this was new and valuable information and I began looking at the platform and work in a new way, realizing that the MoMA was, as Ralph put it, "a capacious container" for any number of ideas from interrogating blackness in art, to being an "instrumentalized institution" (as Thomas Lax put it) that embodies the alignment of power, valuation and wealth.

<rant>On a brief side note, I consistently wonder, across disciplines, how the influence of European (or non-American, anyway) curators affects institutional engagements with race – blackness specifically and diversity in general. I've talked about this before and will talk about it again but, as messed up as America is, we've been talking about and struggling with race since the founding of the country and, literally, fighting about it since The Civil War. I've been to a bunch of European countries and talked to lots of curators and I'm constantly amazed at how much they mock us for our attitudes towards multiculturalism and call us racist, yet have completely managed to fuck it up in their own countries. There is a huge double standard and blind, implicit racism in Eurocentric aesthetic frameworks – visual, performance or otherwise. I find it unlikely that non-American curators will be able to build cultural institutions or exhibits that reflect the complexity and nuance of 21st Century America.</rant>

Anyway – listening to Sabine Breitwieser I realized that from the museum's perspective this was a *huge* deal. She characterized the Atrium as the center or core of this imposing institution and by inviting Ralph to "occupy" the Atrium was investing him as curator – and dance as discipline – with significant power. Still problematic in the idea of "giving" of power, but fascinating. She made a thoughtful observation about how Paxton's piece seemed to be a counterproposal to the culture industry

whereas Bel's seemed to represent a capitulation, which was an interesting point, and she asserted that the movement in Bel's piece was "grotesque" though I'm still unclear what she intended that to mean.

Artist George Ferrandi's observations were less critical, offering more of a personal narrative on how she received the work. She told a great story about working with an artist collective on a project and deciding to invite Katie Pearl to help them with their performance technique. She said that Katie asked the group to stand there for a minute and do nothing, they fidgeted, put their hands in their pockets, etc. Then Katie gave them instructions to focus on something, embody it – and they all stood much more still and focused and attentive. Katie said, "Do you see the difference"? And George said, "Yeah, you ruined it!" Which was really revealing about perspectives on what performance looks like to different artists in different contexts and illuminates part of the divide between visual art performance and theater or dance-based performance. I also think it points to something that is often left out of the conversation – theater and dance-based performers work to be so good that they can faithfully and wholly embody and replicate the *appearance* of the untutored and everyday with absolute consistency time and again. I bring this up because George mentioned how, even in the visual art world, people are starting to return to an appreciation of craft and skill.

I don't remember who mentioned it but someone – maybe several people – rightly pointed out that Judson was a long time ago and a lot has happened since then. The question was raised "what can be achieved through virtuosity?" Even as many artists are explicitly separating choreography from dance and interrogating that relationship, it seems like a useful moment to really re-examine virtuosity and see what role that plays in re-envisioning contemporary dance as a field.

Maria Hassabi was mostly quiet but made some keen observations. She mentioned how she looked around at one point and saw everyone she knew, how it felt like a whole community took a "field trip to MoMA", which seemed to complement Noemie Solomon's interpretation of Bel's piece as "generous", creating a feeling of joy and communal space.

Over the course of the conversation it became clear how much distance there is culturally, aesthetically and linguistically between visual art and dance. I realized that – and I don't necessarily mean this quite as pejoratively as it is going to sound – MoMA's relationship to dance (and performing arts generally) is kind of like the fictitious but instructive anecdote about George H.W. Bush's amazement at a price scanner at the grocery store or the very real accounts of Mitt Romney's (and Karl Rove's) disbelief at losing the election.They honestly never really thought about it before and they're so wrapped up in their own conversations that until now they haven't seen the differences nor been concerned enough to think about it.

As I've said countless times, the origin stories of dance and visual art are vastly different and the existing ecologies and modes of production are totally different. Dance (and theater and live art) takes a village, a community, to build. Even a solo requires a team of collaborators to come to fruition. The fact of the matter is that contemporary dance, like contemporary theater – historically hasn't existed in institutions, it is built outside of the institution and has become professionalized only in the past 30 years or so. We exist in community, we create in community, we are interdependent in a way that visual artists – and visual arts institutions are not. We don't have a market to fall back on for revenue, we don't accrue capital, so we have to rely on sweat equity and each other. We also exist in an oral culture, especially in dance.

During one of the panels Jenny Schlenzka brought up Labanotation and the idea of "the score". I started obsessing about this when I was in Minneapolis in September and I started asking choreographers how they taught dances and how they remembered the movements from any given work, much less numerous works. Most of them told me they had an idiosyncratic writing practice to help them remember. Some actually wrote words, narratives and text. Most had some unique, individual self-generated system of squiggles, shapes, lines and figures that served as mnemonics or pictographs. A friend visiting from Seattle had just seen a Mark Morris piece at PNB and was marveling at how the dancers seemed to literally incorporate Mark Morris into their movement. Choreographers regularly speak of "putting their movement" on a dancer, or dancers talk about embodying movement vocabulary, getting the moves into their bodies. Historically choreographies have been passed down through an oral tradition that conveys information held in the body. Ballet masters remember ballets and teach them to new generations. And even the scripts of Shakespeare, the most iconic playwright in the English language, are textually unstable and subject to interrogation. With little or no stage direction, production specifications or any other instruction, the text exists merely as a starting place for

reinventing the ephemeral experience. Performance makers are ever in pursuit of the truth revealed in the moment before vanishing, we exist in liminality, we seek to connect the ineffable to its glimmering representation, the immanent to its manifestation. This kind of hits at the heart of the question about the difference between “dance” and “choreography”, I think.

Looking at my notes I see a lot of the same things cropping up where the issue of race in art is almost a subset or parallel conversation to dance and the museum: power, ephemerality, erasure, invisibility, representation, blackness vs. whiteness, the body and the real, value, access, agency, multiplicity of voices. Almost everything said generally about the relationship of contemporary dance and the museum can be contextualized specifically in terms of race. So I think it was incredibly genius of Ralph to elide the race conversation and surreptitiously, subversively, almost subliminally, intertwine it with the wider, seemingly less contentious frame of dance and the museum. Some artists addressed it overtly, drawing the connection between the “performance” of the mostly black security guards and their socioeconomic relationship to the institution, some less overtly, but this pervasive intertwining of meanings was resonant, if only on reflection.

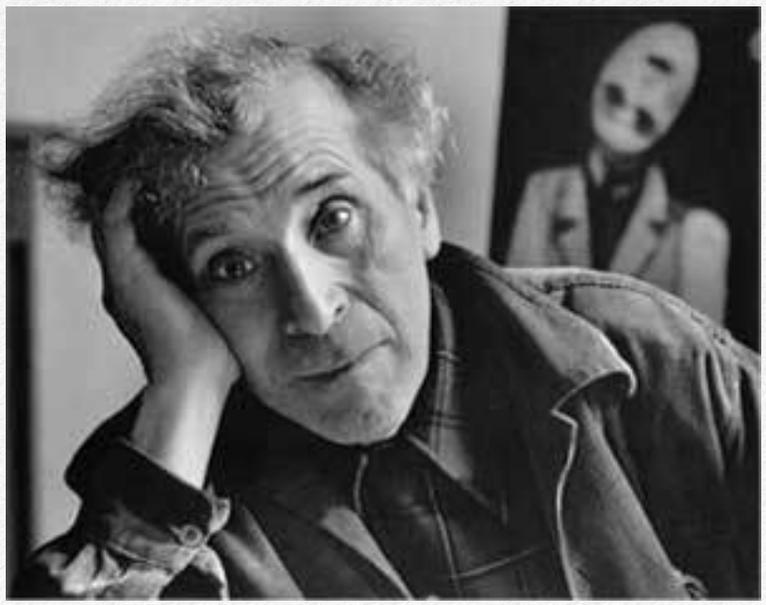
One thing that numerous speakers brought up in various ways was the conditions, limitations and various meanings of the physical space. I have two scribbled notes, one that I will pursue now, one for later. The first was just an idea I think a lot about, “performance as art object”. More and more I think of work like Meg Stuart’s *Blessed*, Reid Farrington’s *The Passion Project* or, more recently, Bill Morrison’s *The Shooting Gallery* as finely calibrated time-based multimedia sculptures. But the other scribbled note was “all performance is site specific” and that really bears repeat examination. I have been thinking quite a bit about context – more on that soon – and the expectations and assumptions that come with place. Galleries, theaters, performance spaces, streets, houses, offices – all places, all sites, all physical or virtual locations – have their own meanings and resonances and every performance, every work of art, exists in relation to those site-specific conditions. A work presented at The Joyce is received differently than a work presented at The Kitchen is received differently than a work presented at NYLA is received differently than a work in Paula Cooper or Eyebeam or an alley, park or office. It seems obvious but it is rarely actually interrogated in any kind of profound or meaningful, effective way. Which is why I have renewed respect for Sarah Michelson.

Of all the pieces included in “Some Sweet Day” Michelson’s seemed to be the most intent on interrogating the space and its meanings while also engaging with Ralph’s prompt. Looking back on the Michelson projects I was involved in – *Shadowmann* and *Daylight* – and subsequent shows I’ve seen, I’m awed by the sheer force of will she exerts to transform and control the narratives of physical space. She is, in fact, dancing about architecture. Or more accurately using dance to challenge architecture, its power and assumptions. I still can’t tell if it is more *Triumph Of The Will* (she does put her face on every costume and creates a daunting cult of personality) or *Spartacus*, or some incredibly complicated hybrid of the two, but of all the pieces she is the one that seems to have really taken things on head to head, moving her dancers outside the proscribed area, truly occupying, infiltrating and subverting MoMA’s narrative.

In terms of engaging with Lemon’s prompt, it seems that Deborah Hay’s *Blues* was the most provocative. I was unaware of the dust-up until Rashaun Mitchell starting talking about his qualms about performing in the piece and trying to negotiate the politics and practice of a racially divided cast. Eventually Niv Acosta talked about the process and the conflict. Niv, in turn, invited Kathy Wasik to tell her side of the story as chronicled over at P-Club. I don’t know nearly enough of the story to recount it here, go to P-Club and read up or to Claudia’s review in the Times, google around too, apparently it was blogged about quite a bit.

All in all the discussion at Danspace Project on Saturday was spirited and informative and it was a welcome opportunity to see all of these curators, thinkers and artists in conversation in one place. I left feeling that even though the challenges are immense and daunting, there is still a lot to be learned from meaningful conversation and exchange between disciplines ad institutions. Hopefully we can find productive, equitable and actionable ways to keep moving forward.

Shana Moulton, I'm Sorry (and other important things)



Marc Chagall

"*I work in whatever medium likes me at the moment.*" - Marc Chagall

Shortly after I published "The Economics of Ephemerality" I got a thoughtful and polite, if strongly worded FB message from Shana Moulton. She rightly took me to task for miscontextualizing her work and, bluntly, being a dick. And she's right. **SHANA MOULTON, I'M SORRY!** Shana wrote a bunch of stuff about the financial challenges she – and most artists I know – face, which I'm not going to share here. But what really hit me where it counts was when she described her practice which is at once very different from theater or dance based practice, but equally intentional and rigorous:

> *The other reason I don't work with all of these performance experts is because I prefer to work by myself–I prefer the artist-alone-in-their-studio/Susan Cain–introvert mode of working and my set of references is largely with artists who've also worked that way: Eleanor Antin, Pipilotti Rist, Miranda July, Alix Pearlstein, Mike Smith, Joan Jonas, Cindy Sherman, and I came of age as an artist during the west coast DIY 90s and the outsider-artist fad of the early aughts. I do everything on my own, including camera, editing, acting, costumes, props, etc, and I plan to keep it that way because I'm interested in finding out what is possible on one's own and I enjoy working this way. I don't make music so I was happy to join Nick in this collaboration but I'm not interested in working with a large group of people or in trying to measure up to the skills or craft of people trained in dance or performance.*

Her email was a splash of cold water in the face for a bunch of reasons including:

1. I'm 100% Pro-Artist

At the end of the day I don't really care what medium someone works in. I am now and have always been 100% pro-artist. I have been working in the arts for more than 20 years in various capacities and have always tried to make sure artists are paid. I believe in artists and creativity in general and when I set out to write these critiques it has never been my intention to slag an artist. Pretty much all artists, in all disciplines, except for a very, very few, work very hard for no money, often losing money to show their work as an "investment" in their "career". This condition is too much to go into here, but no doubt there is a big conversation to be had about work, value, cultural production, "professional vs. amateur" and outdated, wrongheaded romantic ideas of the starving artist. My criticism is for the institutions and the frameworks that privilege some work over others, that assign value without interrogating their assumptions. Someone named Justin Hoover left an obnoxious comment on one of my essays saying, "Bad taste is real taste and good taste is the consequence of other peoples' privilege. Fuck your ideas of good or bad." While I fundamentally disagree with his thoughts on taste and the implication of total relativism that defies calling something "good" or "bad" (only in SF could someone embrace such a fantastically naive and

simplistic idea with such unquestioning conviction). But I don't disagree that privilege plays a role in valuation and who becomes an arbiter of value in our society. But rejecting all legitimate cultural critique on those grounds is, frankly, the worst kind of foolishness. Which leads me to Point #2.

2. DIY, Punk Rock and Technical Amateurishness

Like Shana, I'm a child of the 90s. Well, I'm a little older, so technically I guess mid-80s to early 90s. I grew up when you had to actually go to a record store to find new music, when you sent SASEs across the country to get 'zines and mixed tapes. I was a bored suburban teenager reading Flipside and buried somewhere in the boxes of old crap in my parents' basement you will find have the first issue of Spin Magazine I bought in 1985, the one with Annie Lennox on the cover, where I first learned about the Meat Puppets. One of my favorite books growing up was the 1980 edition of *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* edited by Jim Miller. It was my bible for discovering music and I think it was Greil Marcus who wrote there of the Velvet Underground: "[They] proved that technical amateurishness and deliberate simplicity were no barrier to artistic communication; art rock could never again be equated with complexity, no matter what British progressive-rock bands enamored of the studio might think." So it's not that I don't respect and appreciate technical amateurishness. I do. For me it is about two intertwined elements: context and frame.

I studied theater in college and was always interested in experimental, unconventional work – that's a long story for another time. But when I graduated in 1990 I moved to Seattle and quickly became completely disenchanted with theater in a box that people have to pay tickets to sit and watch. Politically activated by Gulf War I and the anarchist and leftist punks I met while sleeping at the protest encampment at Seattle's Federal Building, I got more involved in other kinds of performance. I ended up doing a lot of politically and socially conscious spoken word, opening for bands and touring around to poetry and spoken word venues on both coasts. Consistent with my political beliefs I rejected virtuosity as an expression of privilege, as exclusionary of marginalized voices and I held on to that for years.

I moved to NYC in October of 1995 and it wasn't until 2004 or so, after I had worked at Performance Space 122 for a few years, that I really started to open up to virtuosity and complexity again. Frankly, I had grown disenchanted with amateurishness as an aesthetic. Political performance started to seem simplistic and pat while amateurishness in art-making, much like "alternative" or DIY in the wider culture – seemed to have become a fashion statement or marketing tactic more than an authentic political choice or artistic proposition. As I reacquainted myself with my training in traditional theater, I married that to my love of the experimental and avant-garde and began to delve more deeply into what has come to be called Contemporary Performance. I started to pull together all the knowledge I had acquired in various disciplines and through my peripatetic creative wanderings, trying to make the aesthetic and intellectual connections that I suppose other people do in graduate school. As I mentioned in an earlier essay, I saw lots of performance in all kinds of places and as I saw more work, the more I craved dramaturgical rigor, formal experimentation, innovation, craft and virtuosity. I knew what things looked like when people were unskilled, I became more interested in what artists could accomplish through the application of skill and practice. The further I moved into skilled performance, the less patience I had for the unskilled, depending on where I was seeing the work, depending on *context*.

3. Context, or All Performance Is Site-Specific

All work is site-specific, whether in a theater, a gallery or the street. Each site comes with its own set of conditions, expectations and valences. For me, for instance, The Kitchen is a place that I associate with sophisticated, skilled performance. Even the deliberately sloppy Radiohole require an enormous amount of skill and craft to create their work. The last time I remember seeing DIY-style work at The Kitchen was when Wynne Greenwood was doing her Tracy and the Plastics project back in 2005 (2004?) and it was so clearly demarcated as an aesthetic choice. So I think when I came to see Shana's performance at The Kitchen it was situated for me next to Sarah Michelson, Dean Moss, Radiohole, Richard Maxwell and all the other highly skilled artists coming from a performance background. It's not an excuse – as an audience member I have to try and meet the work where its coming from – but after Shana explained where she was coming from it made me realize how many preconceptions I was bringing. And I have to to admit, if I see something from a self-identified choreographer or theater maker that doesn't look anything like dance or theater, I'm much more likely to give it the benefit of the doubt .

Anyway – the point is that as I listen more and more to visual art people speak about performance work, as I hear curators like Sabine Breitwieser talk about the work, I realize that I need to try harder to contextualize the work and see it for what it is, not what I think it should be. At the same time, echoing what Shannon Jackson discussed at the recent MoMA event "How Are We Performing Today", it would be really amazing if a two-way dialogue existed, if visual artists and curators would at least try to understand what performing artists do, what conditions exist in the creation and production of dance, theater and live art, what the aesthetic considerations are and what it means to create in the body, in space and time, in "ephemerality" (which is a myth). It would be incredible if the visual art world would at least make a gesture at acknowledging value in the skill and craft and virtuosity of dance and theater makers. If they are really concerned about "experience" and "ephemerality" then they have to be willing to depart at least momentarily from their object-based values system and aesthetics predicated on materiality.

I hope to write more about this moving forward, about what I think are important texts for the education of dance and theater makers and what it means to create time-based art. I'm still hoping to create a "performance for visual artists" workshop where great contemporary theater and dance practitioners can share their practice with visual artists. A pipe dream, I know, but it would be so amazing.

4. The Appearance of Things As They Are vs. How We Would Wish Them To Be Seen

As I read and re-read Shana's FB email I realized that not only had I unwittingly grown away from my more open-minded earlier self, I also saw in her my frustration at how my own work is misunderstood and mis-contextualized.

After running for mayor as a performance project in 2005 and performing as a Demon Tour Guide in Les Freres Corbusier's *Hell House* at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2006, I quit making my own work. At first I wasn't sure what that meant, to give up a familiar creative practice as a writer and performance artist. But through my work at PS122 I realized that helping other people make their artistic visions come to life was a creative endeavor too. And as I started being more intentional in my curating I realized that it was a creative practice: designing events, seasons, arcs of investigation and ideas. And the harder I worked on Culturebot the more it became evident that it was a creative practice too. Now I find myself in an exciting, strange and new place, one that a lot of people don't or can't see – that curating and criticism are creative practices and for me, they combine to function as my art form.

On December 1, 2012 Culturebot.org will be 9 years old. I look back at the very first post and I'm amazed at how well we've cleaved to our original vision and how far we've come. I've been doing this for nine years without any funding or any support – for free, out of passion, pursuing a vision that is only now coming into focus in the eyes of other people. Some people come here and see a blog, some people a web magazine or some such thing. To me Culturebot is and always has been an experiment, a web-based collaborative performance, an ever-evolving exploration of criticism as creative practice, a laboratory for creating a web-native style of writing, thinking and being in an ecology of arts, culture and ideas. This is an art project, a socially engaged work for building dialogue and community, for knowledge and resource sharing; it is a living historical record, however unstable, building a shared narrative where before there was none.

Shana Moulton, I'm sorry. And I'm grateful, too. You reminded me of what it means to be an artist and encouraged me to rediscover the artistry in what I do.

Complicating Theaster Gates



Theaster Gates (photo by Sarah Pooley)

Theaster Gates is charismatic, funny, charming, irreverent and *wicked* smart; he seems like the kind of person you would really love to hang out with, have laughs and conversation with, until you find yourself very drunk, at some secret late night party at an undisclosed location surrounded by an eclectic group of equally awesome, smart, funny, charismatic, creative people.

Unfortunately the social design of *Theaster Gates: A Way of Working*, a forum, lecture, and gallery presentation at The New School, didn't allow for that possibility, at least not from what I saw at The Vera List Center last Wednesday.

The organizers assembled a diverse and thoughtful group of academics to sit behind a table at the front of the room and talk about Theaster's work and its meaning while he sat in the audience, occasionally disrupting the stifling oppositional power structures that the "panel discussion" format so handily enforced.

Looking around the room at the familiar faces in the audience, many of whom are quite knowledgeable, creative and inventive in their own right, I mused on the lost opportunity. This is the grand irony, I suppose, of institutional efforts at "innovative" design, even in a school theoretically dedicated to teaching and promoting public engagement: they are mostly unable to integrate innovative social design into their public engagement programs. The assembled academics, while quite conversant on theories of socially engaged art practice and its various related sub-specialties, either don't have the agency to create change or have not exercised that agency within the institutional power structures where they are employed.

Cynthia Lawson, the Associate Provost for Distributed & Global Education & Associate Professor of Integrated Design, School of Design Strategies, seemed quite aware of this when she read the New School's revised mission statement, noting that it never mentioned, you know, *people*. One is led to speculate on the complex power dynamics between academics and administrators and where the "adaptive challenge" towards innovative social design resides. The unremarkable familiarity of the corporate-speak of the New School mission statement suggests a similar power struggle may be in operation as the one described in Rachel Aviv's recent piece in the New Yorker about John Sexton and NYU.

(Hey Carin & Cynthia, since innovation happens in the margins, etc., if you are looking outside the institution, I'm available to consult, see my writing on criticism as a creative practice, my social art projects like Ephemeral Evidence at Exit Art, Everyone's A Critic at On The Boards, The Brooklyn Commune Project, the public programs I organized at LMCC including River To River or my current work developing a pedagogy for producing as a creative practice.)

Which, fortunately, brings us back to Theaster Gates and *Dorchester Projects*. Since most of my readership is operating outside the visual arts world, they are probably unfamiliar with the project, so here's the description, taken from the artist's website:

> *Dorchester Projects encompasses a cluster of formerly abandoned buildings on Chicago's South Side that Theaster Gates renovated from sites of neglect into a vibrant cultural locus. After making his home in a former storefront on South Dorchester*

Avenue, Gates purchased the neighboring two-story vacant house and initiated a design project to restore and reactivate the home as a site of community interaction and uplift. The success of this project led to the acquisition of a third building across the street, which with the support of grants will be redesigned as a space for film programming and artist residencies.

Another component is the Listening Room. The display windows on the façade of this one-story building recall its previous use as a neighbourhood candy store. Theaster Gates has redesigned the front room to house 8,000 LPs comprising the final inventory from Dr Wax Records, a former record store in the nearby Hyde Park neighbourhood. The record collection has served both spirited and didactic functions, facilitating listening parties and DJ events in the space while being made available to artists and musicians in residence at Dorchester Projects. From December 2011 to July 2012, the collection travelled to the Seattle Art Museum for installation in the exhibition Theaster Gates: The Listening Room. In the future the residential half of the building will be renovated into a reading room and temporary home for the Johnson Library, a donation of the Johnson Publishing Corporation's in-house editors' library and a comprehensive collection of Ebony and Jet magazines founded by John H. Johnson.

Using repurposed materials from all over Chicago, the aesthetic of Gates' Dorchester Projects is both practical and poetic, bridging the creation of new art with the adaptive reuse of resources. Within this multi-functional and growing space, community-driven initiatives and experiences foster neighborhood revitalization and serve as a model for greater cultural and socioeconomic renewal. Dorchester provides its neighbors and local youth the opportunity to perceive built and living environments as spaces worth constructing, exploring and critiquing. It empowers community members to engage in the movement of radical hospitality by physically transforming their surroundings and filling them with beautiful objects, diverse people and innovative ideas.

On Wednesday, in response to a young artist's question about Gates' participation in the art market, Theaster made several very funny, and pointed statements, the first being that he got to a point in his practice when he felt that if he saw something wrong with urban development or building codes, he "wasn't going to make a painting about it."

I wanted to applaud, not only because the line was delivered with great comic timing, but because I wanted to shout it at everyone in the performance world who wants to make plays and dances "about" things, self-limiting their artistic practice by accepting conventional notions of form and aesthetics.

The second was about money. Gates said, essentially, that it costs money to make art and that he personally doesn't give a fuck where the money comes from. Foundations, government, individual giving, corporate sponsorship, fuck it, if its money, he'll take it. I think this is refreshingly candid and practical, but also fraught.

No doubt one of the central functions of art is to create a frame around the real, to direct attention towards the hitherto invisible or overlooked, thereby creating value. The value is predicated on the stature and legitimacy of the artist who is creating the aforementioned frame, either conceptually or literally.

As with Creative Time with Paul Chan and *Waiting For Godot In New Orleans*, Gates is using his star power and charisma to leverage his art market value to direct capital to a neglected and vulnerable community. Unlike *Godot*, Gates is working where he lives, and so escapes being tarred with the brush of disaster tourism and opportunism.

Gates' approach to money can be viewed through multiple lenses. From a racial perspective, Gates is brashly taking on a significant and, unfortunately, persistent condition. From Chuck Berry's notorious insistence on being paid with a briefcase full of cash before performing, to the true (but apocryphal-seeming) story of James Brown's disbelief that Don Cornelius built the Soul Train empire entirely free from white money, to Jason Zinoman's recent article in the Times about black comedians choosing not to work at Upright Citizen's Brigade because they don't pay, the history of black artists and money is rife with tales of deception, fraud and exploitation. Black artists have to be practical about money, because they don't, generally, have the luxury of indifference that white privilege provides.

At the same time, Gates inhabits a precarious position, as does any artist working in real estate and finance. His website says:

> *Theaster Gates has developed an expanded artistic practice that includes space development, object making, performance and critical engagement with many publics. Gates transforms spaces, institutions, traditions, and perceptions.*

Gates's training as an urban planner and sculptor, and subsequent time spent studying clay, has given him keen awareness of the poetics of production and systems of organizing. Playing with these poetic and systematic interests, Gates has assembled gospel choirs, formed temporary unions, and used systems of mass production as a way of underscoring the need that industry has for the body.

So the question arises, does an expanded frame of artistic practice demand expanded frames of critical engagement?

As Gates brings his urban planning training to bear on his artistic practice, should we consider Dorchester Projects alongside other ambitious social design projects like James Rouse's *Columbia, MD*., Donald Trump's *Riverside South*, Bruce Ratner's *Atlantic Yards Project*, Walt Disney's *Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow*, the various works in Robert Moses' oeuvre or even the City of Chicago's ambitious but eventually failed socially-engaged masterwork, *Cabrini-Green*? Are those projects any less artful, ambitious, innovative and dynamic than Gates' work? Is there a clear distinction? Or is that juxtaposition part of Gates' intent?

Insofar as Gates is working with "money as material" (in a phrase borrowed from Shannon Jackson, Super Genius), should his art be compared to others with similar practices, like fellow Chicagoan Edmund "Eddie" O'Connor (b. 1925 –d. 2011) who invented derivatives or Michael Milken, who was one of the first artists working with money as material to promote the idea that "capital structure deeply matters". Milken pioneered the practice of "financing entrepreneurs who had good ideas for building companies that became significant engines of job growth," a practice that is implied in Gates' work with Dorchester, but is not explicit.

Which leads to the question of impact. When evaluating an artwork created through an expanded practice that includes real estate, finance and social innovation, are we to limit our critique to the existing aesthetic frameworks of visual art or apply the standards of the expanded practices?

If one element of Gates' project is social impact, are there numbers that substantiate that impact? Do the residents of Dorchester Projects have an equity stake in the outcome of Gates' work? Has he created jobs, lowered crime, reinforced social fabric and increased the quality of life or standard of living? Did his project include any of the collaborative social design practices that we see used by organizations like The Hester Street Collaborative? Or is he using Dorchester Projects as clay, real estate and capital as potter's wheel and kiln, to craft an intricate, living object after his vision? Is the success or failure of the project entirely predicated on the value of the artist in a volatile and fickle art market or is it meant to become a living thing, self-perpetuating a virtuous cycle of urban life enriched by creative expression?

This seems to be the central problem of high end socially engaged art. Even as its practitioners attempt to measure their distance from the visual art market, its success is measured from within those market frameworks. High end socially engaged art is not so unlike Brad Pitt's New Orleans housing projects or other pet charities of famous people in that the work is largely dependent on the celebrity and charisma of the artist for its realization. Because capital, as noted by panel participant Kevin McQueen, is notoriously risk averse. Capital – even so-called venture capital – doesn't want to go where no one has gone before. It wants guarantees, it wants assurances, it favors insider knowledge and reduced risk, guaranteed maximum

ROI. So when Gates succeeds, he does so on the basis of his fame and within existing frameworks of value and capital.

What if, for instance, the work were to be judged by impact, how would it be measured? The Puma Impact Award for independent feature-length documentary films measures impact using the following criteria:

> Awareness - How a film demonstrably changed public awareness of a given issue
>
> Corporate Change- Influenced corporate policy on sustainability or workplace issues
>
> Political Change – Impacted lawmakers & politicians triggering reviews or enquiries
>
> Behavioral Change- Affected consumer purchasing or voting decisions
>
> Capacity Building- How the film helped build capacity or raised funds for campaign organizations and other partners

For most performing arts institutions, impact reports are a fact of life. They are required to demonstrate effectiveness, identify target audiences, quantify the number of people served, identify their demographics, justify their programs in relation to their mission and so forth. Since they create nothing of tangible value – no objects for sale – it is nearly impossible to make purely aesthetic justifications for funding, or to bring the weight of curators, gallerists, institutions or academia to bear on demonstrating value beyond difficult-to-quantify impact. And because funding for artists' work in the performing arts is mostly funneled through institutions, questions of aesthetics and impact are deeply intertwined, as opposed to the visual arts where artists are funded directly based on aesthetic criteria. It seems that affirmative aesthetic appreciation of an artist's work and its subsequent market value is a significant indicator of their ability to attract funding for socially engaged work. I am loathe to say whether this is good or bad, I have my prejudices, but it requires more resources and investigation than I am able to bring to the task.

As mentioned previously, when a young artist at the symposium questioned Gates about his participation in the art market, he included a half-joking aside that, as a recent graduate, he also needed a job. Gates' answer was revealing in that his ecumenical approach to attracting capital was driven, at least in part, by his determination not to have any other job but "artist".

Gates said something along the lines of, "what are we going to do, form some kind of guild, some kind of trade association?" – I didn't record it so I can't go back, but he seemed to imply that having a job, another job other than "artist" somehow invalidated the authenticity of an individual's claim to *being* an artist. I may have misinterpreted it, but that is what I thought I heard. And this is where it becomes really complicated, as we're exploring in Brooklyn Commune.

First, most self-identified artists will never make a living solely as artists, so income derived from art practice is not necessarily a valid measure for assessing artistic credibility. Secondly, there's nothing wrong with having a job. Most artists are, at the very least, teachers, if not something else entirely.

In fact, as art practice, artisanship, trade, craft, production, aesthetics and critical theory increasingly converge in vastly expanded art practices across all disciplines, the reality is that anything can be framed as an artistic endeavor. The distinction between the artist who outsources production and the artist who labors bears interrogation, and the frameworks for critical evaluation and aesthetic appreciation of work created through "expanded practices" demands concomitant expansion, if not complete reinvention.

An artist may wish to distance him or herself from the visual art market and its trade in objects, but unless s/he intentionally and transparently turns his/her attention to asserting alternative value structures and evaluative criteria, s/he is doing little more than gaming the system in the short term.

If we are to widen the frame of critical evaluation of expanded art practices then they must include the criteria and histories of the newly adopted practices. So if artists move into real estate, finance, urban planning and social design, those concerns must be moved into the evaluative equations. Similarly, if artists move into performance, there is a concomitant necessity to learn the histories of music, dance

and theater, the preceding aesthetic frameworks and the means of cultural production in those disciplines.

On that note, the word "transdisciplinary" was used so frequently throughout the day at *Theaster Gates: A Way of Working* that I had to bite my tongue.

First, because the conversations were hardly trans-*anything* as the panel structure created a fundamentally irremediable condition of binary discourse. Even the most promising conversations, like a nascent debate between Katayoun Chamany (on the panel) and Shannon Jackson (from the audience) about biology, art, science, nature, nurture and environment, died on the vine. Oh, to revisit that lost opportunity!

Second, because no other artistic practices were represented in the discourse. On April 2, 2013 I was in the same room at the Vera List Center, only for the launch of Blink Your Eyes: Sekou Sundiata Revisited. The Sekou program, still running at various venues for a few more weeks, "celebrates Sekou Sundiata's broad vision for bold, rigorous, multidisciplinary artistic expression that emerges from a love for one's community, a passion for real democracy and social justice, and a vision for a better world."

The only crossover between the Gates and Sekou events was the ever-inspiring, warm and wonderful Richard Harper, Professor of Music/Voice at The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, who, from the dais, engaged Gates (in the audience) in a beautiful, impromptu moment of call-and-response singing. During the Q&A I asked if anyone had been at the Sekou event or even knew who Sekou was. You could have heard a pin drop. And that is, as they say, a cryin' shame.

Sekou, while a professor at the New School, created a national program called The America Project, which "stimulates critical citizenship, imagination, and civic dialogue through creative process and public engagement, placing artists in leadership roles to enlist diverse community members in exchanges that promote common purpose and visionary thinking for social change." There is even a handbook of related pedagogy that can be downloaded for free.

But of course, since Sekou's practice was music and spoken word, he hardly gets adequate recognition in the performing arts world, much less the rarified world of so-called fine art. And not to beat a dead horse (I'm about to beat a dead horse) *all performing arts are socially engaged*. Whether explicitly, like the work of theater company 10,000 Things in Minneapolis or composer Susie Ibarra's recent *Circadian Rhythms* at RPI, or implicitly through collaborative processes, creating live performance is inherently social. There is no such thing as "studio practice" where you make an object in your room and put it on a wall in a gallery for people to look at. To make dance, theater, live music or performance of any kind, you must put yourself in a social setting, you have to negotiate complex interpersonal interactions, you have to be together physically, with bodies and minds as your raw material, each rehearsal room a sociological experiment, a living microcosmic prototype of possible worlds, a practical workshop in individually embodied, collectively enacted, social change.

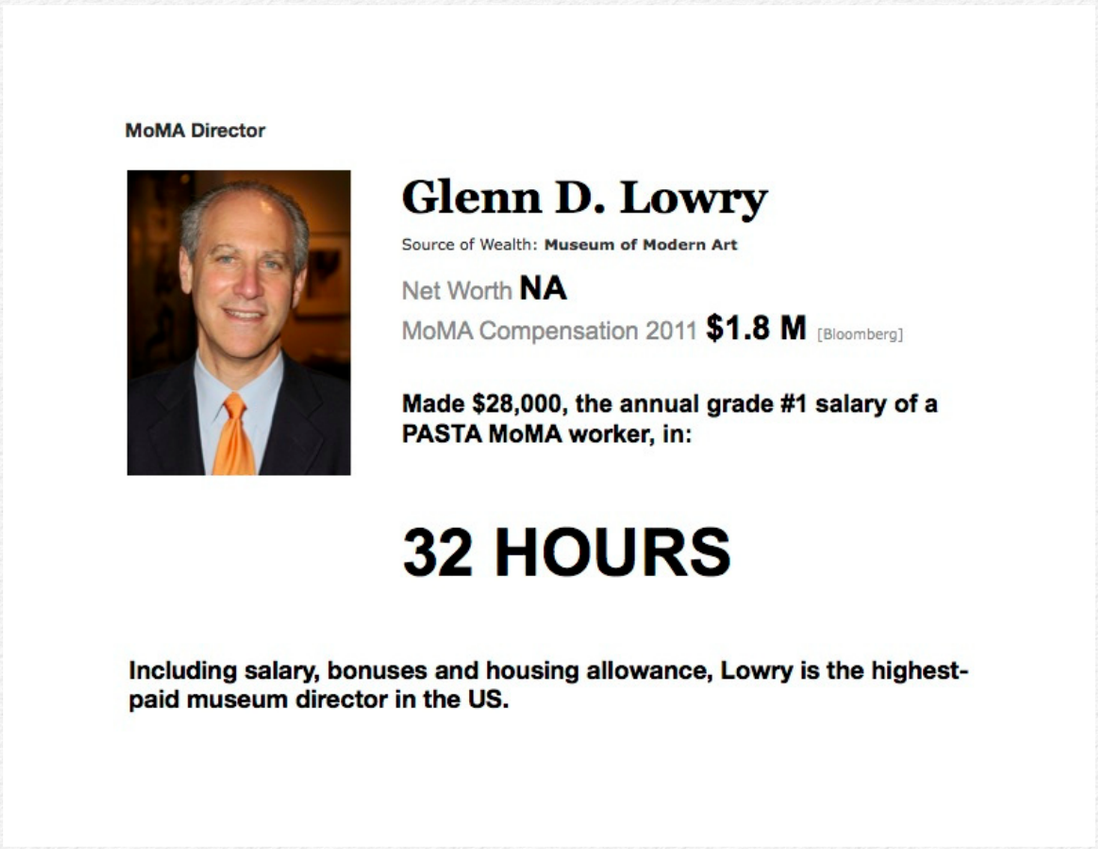
The fact that Theaster Gates is working in an "expanded art practice" that is not in dialogue with pre-existing art practices engaged with the same ideas is disappointing. The fact that the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School was "engaged" with both of these projects, that Sekou developed his project ***at the New School***, but nobody figured out how to put these things together, is, frankly, criminal. But it is emblematic of the profound dysfunction and deep divisions of our artistic, educational and cultural systems in America. With as much talk as we hear about creating "commons" and "community" and "public engagement" the fundamental life practices those values are based on – cooperation, collaboration, resource and knowledge-sharing, mutual respect and openness – are rarely embodied practices in the life of an institution. But that is another topic for another day…

As flawed as it was, I'm glad the Vera List Center honored Theaster Gates and I'm grateful to have been exposed to his work, I'm excited by the conversations he inspires and hope they will carry over into other fields.

In that vein, I also hope that the institutional structures around this kind of work will evolve to a point where it can resonate outside the halls of academia and the pages of Art Forum; where the frameworks of expanded art practice actually expand beyond the narrow lens of visual art to meaningfully include other disciplines, their histories, aesthetics, contexts and values; and where the sphere of engagement widens significantly beyond the art world itself.

ACTIONS! and Other Art Worker Tales

On September 28, 2013 I attended conceptual artist Simon Leung's collaboratively created performance event ACTIONS! at The Kitchen. I was initially attracted by the question he posed in the project description, "In our age of precarious work, what is the role of the 'art worker?'" as this line of investigation is central to the Brooklyn Commune Project. I went with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation but found myself moved, almost from the outset, by the David and Goliath story of the MoMA art workers' strikes and the heartfelt, earnest artlessness of the performers.



The event began with a slide show entitled "Actions Countdown" by the artist Andrea Fraser.

"Actions Countdown" by Andrea Fraser

The first slide informs us that MoMA director Glenn Lowry makes $1.8M a year, is the highest paid museum director in the U.S. and, as such, makes $28,000 in 32 hours, $28K/yr being the annual grade #1 salary of a Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA) MoMA Worker.

The slides continue through the roster of MoMA Trustees from Eli Broad to Ronald Lauder to Agnes Gund and so on, each one earning $28K more quickly than the next, until we finally learn that some MoMA trustees earn that much in mere minutes. It is a very stark, powerful and concrete illustration of the distance between the artists, the art workers and the keepers of the museum.

The slide show sets the tone for a series of twelve scenes that recount the story of the three "actions" directed at the Museum of Modern Art — first in the 1960/70s by the Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerrilla Art Action Group, second during a four month-long workers' strike against the museum in 2000 and the more recent general protests by art-activist groups such as Occupy Wall Street Arts & Labor.

We get firsthand accounts of life on the picket line in 2000 and fanciful reconstructions based on transcripts of organizing meetings from all three eras. A surreal meeting between art workers and museum administrators jumps back and forth between decades, mirroring the recurrence of the central issues and the persistent naive optimism of the artists themselves.

We learn about MoMA's betrayal of its mission in numerous ways, including closing its film stills archive – the preeminent archive of film history in the world – and then moving it to The Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center in Hamlin, Pennsylvania, partially as retribution against curator Mary Corliss for supporting the 2000 strike. After 30 years as curator and caretaker of the collection Mary had begun to earn an annual salary of some $40K a year and dared to think that the starting salary of $17K for most employees at MoMA was too little. A veteran of the earlier strike, MoMA wanted her gone, and the relocation of the collection made it impossible for her to

continue working there. Not only did Mary Corliss lose her job, the public lost access to the collection, which remains inaccessible to this day.

One artist does a stand-up comedy routine, others a song and dance with a model of the now-iconic Inflatable Rat. In one particularly amusing scene, Leung, inspired by City Center's Encores! Off Center presentation of Cradle Will Rock, uses dialogue from the play about open vs. closed shops and repurposes it to explain the debates around the formation of PASTA – the MoMA employees' union.

The twelve scenes unfold at a leisurely pace, and vary widely in tone and content. Some use assemblage techniques to interpolate found texts with original material, some blend historical re-enactments with fiction, others use the presentational aesthetics of Agitprop street theater. The description on The Kitchen's website offers that the piece uses the "conventions of workers' theater, academic conference, vaudeville, and postmodern dance" – and one might well add devised theater, community theater, documentary theater and a host of other familiar performance practices.

Given that Leung, a conceptual artist, was drawing so much on well-known theatrical practices for the staging and creation of this collective art action, I wondered what Leung's theatrical background was and why there were no self-identified theater artists involved in the creation or performance of the work. So I called him.

Simon and I talked the first time for almost two hours on the phone and met in person a few weeks later for an animated brunch conversation in Greenpoint. Over the course of several hours we covered a vast landscape of topics from the role of class as a plot driver in early 1980's popular film to the conundrum of "affect versus identity" in the presentation of the self in the post-post-post-Modern moment, to Mexican-American Heavy Metal bands to the impact of globalization on regional variability and much, much more.

I was absolutely charmed by his intelligence and candor, not to mention his patience in guiding me through his life and work as a conceptual artist. We both share a passion for art that exists at the intersection of critical theory, politics and the avant-garde, and I was eager to learn the conceptual history of ACTIONS! and his previous body of work.

Leung knew early on that he wanted to be an artist; in high school he wrote papers on Chris Burden (9th grade), Andy Warhol (10th grade) and Brancusi (11th grade). He readily credits Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelly and Vito Acconci as influences; reading Elizabeth Kley's 1996 artnet review of his show at Pat Hearn Gallery or listening to Leung's 2010 Slought Foundation lecture on Marcel Duchamps' Étant donnés, one can see how his investigations have expanded on the work of those earlier artists, pushing them in new conceptual directions.

"I've been working on ACTIONS! for thirteen years," Leung told me. "Shortly after Yvonne Rainer and I attended the strike at MoMA in 2000, I knew I wanted to make a piece about it. But it wasn't until Tim Griffin and The Kitchen took an interest that I was able to find the funding to do it."

"Looking back at the history of PASTA and especially thinking about 40 years of history of women's labor, things have gotten worse. In 1971 young educated women workers organized for better wages, and now those women don't even get jobs, they're just interns. I have to fact check it, but we were told that at one point even the intern MetroCard subsidy had been cut because the summer internship fund had been invested with Bernie Madoff."

The impetus for this version of the piece was to trace what had happened in the past thirteen years. "Tim put my name in front of it, but it really was a collaboration with a much looser form of authorship. For instance, almost every line in the Art Workers section is a quotation from transcripts of conversations from 1969 and Housing Works in 2012."

"It was important that it be cast with real people, people who were there in 2000, there in the 1960s, participating in Occupy Arts & Labor, and so on. Everyone who was in the piece had a reason to be in the piece. People told me what they can do, and they provide what they can provide. So everyone who is in the piece is also doing something else in the piece – videos, karaoke, sound, text – we all built this together."

Since there is such a long history of this kind of work in the dance and theater worlds, I asked Simon if he knew about the extensive documentary theater work of Rimini Protokoll or Ping Chong's Undesirable Elements project, which has been working with non-performers to tell their untold stories for over twenty years.

“I’m not familiar with Rimini Protokoll, but of course I know Ping’s work, and we were doing something different with ACTIONS! When you think of documentary film, for instance, it can take any form, but we tend to think of it in terms of facts. Look at Godard – he re-calibrated how information is conveyed, how it can come across in a non-conventional form. I wanted to use a variety of forms – worker’s theater, vaudeville, post modern dance, an academic conference – for instance, to convey the information in a different way.”

I asked, “Given your interested in collage-based performance aesthetics, and experiments in unexpected formal and textual juxtapositions, I’m curious if you are familiar with Hans-Thies Lehmann’s seminal work Postdramatic Theater? He has written rather comprehensively about the history of these practices in theater from the 1960s to today.”

“No, it sounds interesting, I’ll have to read it,” said Simon. “But like I said, my influences are really more Acconci, Burden, Kelly and McCarthy. I wasn’t trying to make a theater piece, I didn’t want to have actors. In fact, with ACTIONS! a lot of people didn’t even show up for rehearsal, so the first performance was kind of like a dress rehearsal, and that is the aesthetic of the piece.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair to the audience,” I said.

“Well, this piece wasn’t really for them. ACTIONS! is more like community theater – we made it for the people who were there. Nobody knows about the 2000 strike, nobody remembers the strikers and I wanted to say ‘This is something, this happened, this is important.’ And it meant a lot to those people. Mary Corliss came twice, for instance.”

I told him I understood and appreciated his position but still, there *was* an audience, and as one of those audience members, I would have appreciated more consideration of my experience. “For instance,” I said, “in the final sequence it seemed like you wanted everybody to sing along to this vaguely familiar worker’s anthem by Joe Hill – you sent performers into the audience and, facing the stage, began singing. It was really awkward and confusing!”

Simon laughed. “That’s so funny! That part is the one that people seem to find really problematic. I didn’t want anyone to sing along. You know the guy who was standing center stage conducting? He is supposed to stand for Glenn Lowry. In 2000 Glenn Lowry would stand up in the window of MoMA and look down at the strikers. When they would chant or sing, he would pretend to conduct them from his window! And we see that gesture return in Lowry’s TedTalk speech that we quote in ACTIONS.”

(ACTIONS! quotes Lowry from 0:00-2:40 and 8:17 to 9:51.)

Simon continued: “He talks about Marina Abramovic at MoMA and literally co-opts performance art in front of us. So I wanted to comment on what has happened, even to this supposedly radical form. What I wanted to have happen was for him to be conducting, in silence, for a long time. So the show kind of begins and ends with Glenn Lowry. In a way it is a ‘Fuck You’ to Glenn Lowry!”

I sat with that for a moment and tried to unravel my complex skein of thoughts and emotions.

“But there are people who know how to do that,” I said, finally. “That is what skilled, trained theater directors know how to do. They craft the arc of the entire event, they think about how people get on and off the stage, how to plant clues to follow an idea or a character or a theme over the course of an evening and direct the audience’s attention in subtle, nuanced ways, to create a meaningful and transformative effect on the audience. When Richard Serra or Mark Di Suvero want to make one of their huge sculptures, they hire a fabricator! They know that they don’t have the skill to realize their vision, so they hire someone who does.”

“I agree with you…”

“Then why didn’t you want to work with someone who could help you realize your vision?”

“Well,” he said, “There’s this idea of de-skilling…”

I cut him off. “I know what de-skilling is. I was just on a panel with Claire Bishop and have been down this road many, many times,” I said. “What I can’t understand is why you would choose to embrace an aesthetic of deskilling rather than bring in someone who actually knows what they are doing and could help you create a better work of art, while still adhering to your politics, principles and aesthetic priorities.”

I immediately felt bad for being rude.

“I’m sorry, Simon. Thanks for being patient. I really loved what you were trying to do with the show and I really believe in the same things, I just can’t wrap my head around it. You’re not the first artist I’ve heard talk about how much they hate theater, but I don’t understand why, if visual artists hate it that much, they continue to make it!”

As we talked I came to several realizations. One is that “visual art performance” is like outsider art for theater. I began to understand how trained visual artists from elite institutions can get upset when unskilled amateurs make paintings and sculptures that garner critical praise and earn big money in galleries. A trained theater or dance artist will find it frustrating, even angering, to watch – but the work offers an institutional critique that can question assumptions of the form and provide valuable insights.

I also realized that the reason these conversation are so difficult, so often, is that we are in a kind of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* scenario, where even when we are in agreement, we are coming from such vastly different experiences and world views that it is hard to find common ground for communication.

My third realization was that if we, as artists, are to achieve any kind of change in our material conditions or create any real change in the world at large, we *have* to find a way to communicate with each other, we must find common ground and build solidarity. If we are to resist our systematic exploitation by the market-driven logic of institutions and funders, then we need to move ourselves beyond all institutionally imposed structures and received narratives to build a movement that is mutually respectful, tolerant and supportive.

And finally, I realized that while for Claire Bishop, *et al*, the aesthetic of deskilling is merely source material for witty *bon mots* and clever cocktail party *repartee*, it is actually an implicit devaluation of the labor of theater and dance artists. If we are going to talk about the role of the art worker in a precarious age, if we are going to talk about the relationship between arts and labor, if we are going to work for real change, then deskilling must no longer be relegated to idle ivory tower aesthetic discourse but must be called to account for its insidious complicity in the exploitation of artists. The aesthetic of deskilling is merely the art-critical manifestation of a wider worldview that devalues craft, training and anything that visibly connects labor to outcome as it affirms corporate capitalism’s disdain for the communitarian values of civil society.

Lest you think I am being hyperbolic, I point to the Glenn Lowry TedTalk that Simon Leung included in ACTIONS! Lowry is brilliant – and evil – as he reframes Occupy Wall Street, performance art and artists generally, under the rubric of creative disruption as it relates to capitalism. In the beginning of the talk he implies that artists and activists don’t know how to do anything with their ideas, but those ideas, when co-opted into the institution, become meaningful and powerful. The institution, of course, is Visual Art, with The Museum serving as non-profit instrument for the creation of market value.

Lowry goes on to use Marina Abramovic’s “The Artist Is Present” as an example, *natch*. His talk is billed as being about “the trend toward performance art and **the rise of the individual**” and this provides us a key insight from which to frame Lowry’s position and that of the Visual Art Museum.

In his book *How To Change The World*, scholar Eric Hobsbawm, discussing the historical antecedents to the philosophy of Karl Marx, writes, “It is not possible to dismiss quite so summarily the ancient religious and philosophical traditions which, with the rise of modern capitalism, acquired or revealed a new potential for social criticism, or confirmed an established one, because the revolutionary model of a **liberal-economic society of unrestrained individualism conflicted with the social values of virtually every hitherto known community of men and women.**”

Andrew O’Hehir, writing in Salon, says, “One of the greatest acts of neoliberal hypnosis over the past 40 years has been convincing almost everyone in mainstream politics, conservatives and liberals alike, that it was both fiscally prudent and morally necessary to subject the entire public sphere to “market forces.” It was neither prudent nor necessary; it was a vicious and misguided political decision, rooted in a quasi-religious dogma that sought to imprint the values of the market on every aspect of society and has largely succeeded.”

Lowry’s vision of performance art and the individual, as embodied by Abramovic, is essentially an expression of unfettered free market capitalism that has little to do with actual capitalism and everything to do with ruthless corporate exploitation and

privatization of public value. In his conception of society, it is the myth of the individual as rational actor in a free market that serves as the pinnacle of human achievement and the linchpin of social organization. Thus Abramovic's current work, enabled by the institutional support of MoMA, its trustees and curators, is essentially a spectacular performance of self-commodification: how does one dehumanize and objectify oneself to the point where the Self no longer exists but as a Brand, as a mere signifier pointing to emptiness?

Witness the absurdity of Lady Gaga and Jay-Z helping Abramovic on Kickstarter (as if Gaga and Jay-Z couldn't just underwrite the entire project themselves), among other cynical strategies for framing self-commodification as an art form.

Abramovic is in the vanguard of visual art's aesthetic colonialism. She seeks to open what is, essentially, a theater, but calls it a space for performance art to distance it from that downmarket reality, making it sexier and more attractive to collectors. Abramovic patents and purveys a method of performance that references both the outdated training techniques of Method acting and the meditative exercises of a long line of spiritualist charlatans. As I wrote on Tumblr a few months back:

> *… she is a modern day Mme Blavatsky, the Russian-German Occultist who was a sensation in late 19th century Paris.*

And of course the fantastically fickle & shallow high end art world slavers at her quasi-mystical gobbledygook. Like Madonna & Kabbalah or Marianne Williamson & *A Course In Miracles* or Tom Cruise & Scientology, it is all a bunch of bunk for the spiritually vacant and easily duped. This is what happens when you sell your soul for a strap-on.

Abramovic's sleight of hand in making theater and calling it visual art is only possible through the well-capitalized exertions of the visual art museum as it relentlessly pursues a monopolistic claim on cultural capital in a supposedly post-object world. Insofar as almost all art, including live music, uses vision as a means of encounter, one might well ask what *isn't* visual art? And herein lies the great complication. If all art is potentially "visual art", then all other forms become subservient to the aesthetic criteria of the visual art museum.

I am certainly not the first to suggest that Visual Art does not exist at all and I am quite sure that others have, at some point, suggested that the term "Visual Art" is more useful as a signifier for a certain kind of speculative marketplace than for any particular form of creative expression. Visual Art Performance, then, is performance created to exist in the Art Market, even as it measures its distance from that market. And it is a mighty market indeed, as ACTIONS! so clearly conveys, and as we can see from the Francis Bacon triptych that recently sold for $142.4 million at Christie's.

According to the NY Times:

> *The Bacon triptych was not the only highflier. A 10-foot-tall mirror-polished stainless steel sculpture that resembled a child's party favor, Jeff Koons's "Balloon Dog (Orange)" sold to another telephone bidder for $58.4 million, above its high $55 million estimate, becoming the most expensive work by a living artist sold at auction …. Four celebrated collectors own the others: Steven A. Cohen, the hedge-fund billionaire, has a yellow one; Eli Broad, the Los Angeles financier, owns a blue one; François Pinault, the French luxury goods magnate and owner of Christie's, has the magenta version; and Dakis Joannou, the Greek industrialist, has his in red.*

As astonishing as that might seem, even to people in the visual art world, try and imagine how that looks to people in the performing arts. Composer Sarah Kirkland Snider posted a pointedly funny open letter on her Facebook page:

> *Dear "Balloon Dog" collectors: For that price, you could have rescued the New York City Opera, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, AND the Minnesota Orchestra, three of our country's musical treasures. I get that that profoundly heroic claim to fame doesn't look as cool in your living room as a large stainless steel balloon animal, but for $58.4 million I imagine there would have been*

spare change to name a Lincoln Center plaza after you or commission a marble bust of you for your living room — or hell even to ask Jeff Koons to create another balloon animal for you, cut rate, as a gesture of solidarity with his fellow artists in the world of music! I am appealing to your ego and reason here: when you go, is the world really going to remember that you had a very cool balloon dog? But they will remember that you saved two orchestras and an opera.

Just a thought. I know you have a long list of deserving artistic and humanitarian ways to save the world instead of buying a very cool giant balloon dog and I appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Sarah

The truly destructive and deleterious effects of visual art's colonization of performance can be seen most profoundly, and tragically, in the Performa Biennial, which will conclude on November 24.

I always know when Performa rolls around because I start getting emails from my friends like, "Oh my God you should write something about that Ryan McNamara piece it was HORRIBLE!" or "Did you see Rashid Johnson's *Dutchman*? Please tell me you're going to rip it apart!!? It was BRUTAL!" or "Can you believe that BAM presented *The Humans* as part of Performa? Did you see it? It was so bad it was laughable!"

As usual, the performances by visual artists were terrible but visual art audiences don't seem to know the difference or to mind all that much. Maybe they're habituated to unpleasant experiences. But this year – as with every Performa biennial – there were some really great performances too, all by actual choreographers.

The biennial began promisingly with the playful duet *Still Standing You* by Belgian choreographer/dancer Pieter Ampe and Portuguese choreographer/dancer Guilherme Garrido. Later, choreographer Maria Hassabi offered a new work, PREMIERE, at The Kitchen, and just last week French choreographer Jérôme Bel brought his work *Disabled Theater* to NYLA.

I want to pause here and discuss this work in more detail.

Disabled Theater is a collaboration between Bel and 11 actors from Zurich's Theater Hora, Switzerland's best-known professional theater company comprised of actors with learning and mental disabilities.

I missed *Disabled Theater* when it was featured as part of Theatertreffen in Berlin, but it was controversial then – both because Bel is a choreographer making theater and because it was seen as "disability porn". But my colleagues who did see it almost uniformly loved it, and I couldn't wait for it to come to NYC.

Disabled Theater is a stunning example of why craft and skill are absolutely necessary in the creation of dance and theater. Almost all of the strategies that Leung aspired to deploy in ACTIONS! are used here to great effect, yet no visual artist could have made this piece.

As a choreographer, Bel understands the nature of time, the nature of attention and the profound resonance of embodiment. He understands the subtlety required for negotiating subjectivity between "audience" and "performer" and the third entity that is created out of the two. He is meticulous and careful as he frames his performers, creating that most ephemeral condition of collective trust and openness that allows for surprise, insight and expanded self-knowledge.

The performance begins with each of the disabled performers entering and standing center stage, in silence, for a full minute. The audience is thus gently compelled to sit and apprehend the totality of the human being in front of us. Then each of the performers comes out again, individually, and tells us their name, their age and their profession. All of them self-identify as actors, which tells us something about the complexity of their sense of identity and their agency in choosing to be in this show. Next they all enter and sit on stage next to each other in a curved row of chairs.

The audience is called upon to see these performers individually and collectively. We see the diversity in this group that has been uniformly labeled “disabled” – we see the range of disabilities, the individual styles, outlooks, demeanors and personalities. Over the course of the performance, as each actor is asked to share incrementally more of their personal history and perspective, we see them not only as distinct individuals but as a complex community, a mirrored microcosm of the audience.

Bel has asked each of them to choose a song and create a solo dance – a technique he has used previously to great effect in *The Show Must Go On*. The performances are stunning, not because of their technical virtuosity, as none of the performers are trained dancers, but because of what each dance tells us about the person performing. Bel calls upon the audience to witness the vital, vibrant, unique, inner lives of each of these actors as they are manifested in their dances. He is at once compelling us to confront our own preconceptions and prejudices, and remonstrating us for the defenses we have constructed to separate ourselves from others.

The disabled actors haven’t put up the same defenses, haven’t developed the same social callousness and guardedness, they have a different relationship to ego. Certainly they have egos – and it is fascinating and often funny to watch them interact with each other during the show – but they are not at all ironic, they are passionately sincere. When they dance, they hold nothing back, they truly dance as if no-one is looking – they remind us, the audience, of who we could be, who we might be, if we were only a fraction as brave as these actors.

Disabled Theater is transcendent, profound and moving. It truly challenges us and changes us, it does more than convey facts, it offers us the chance to experience something meaningful, eternal and true. It brings us into a new way of being and compels us to aspire to be more human.

Legendary Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s most influential writing on film is called *Sculpting In Time,* but the phrase could just as well be used to describe choreography or theater. To be able to sculpt in time, to use as one’s material not clay, or wood, or paint, but time, light, sound and the human body, to use phenomenology as one’s canvas, is extraordinarily difficult. To be a dancer, actor or singer, to use one’s own body as the tool for creative expression, to attempt to bridge the existential gap between isolated selves, to attempt to achieve profound intersubjectivity, is a Herculean task that requires years of training and study. To dismiss that skill, as visual art performance does, is not only criminal, it is in collusion with the dehumanizing forces already at work in society at large.

It is disingenuous at best to place *Disabled Theater,* curated by NYLA’s Carla Peterson or the work of dancer/choreographer Maria Hassabi, curated by Matthew Lyons, next to a “visual art performance” celebrity circle jerk and imply equivalence.

If the Performa Biennial aspires to be anything more than a slick marketing effort to create value in the so-called visual art world, if it truly aspires to the historical grandeur implied by founder RoseLee Goldberg’s rhetoric, then it would make a clean break from visual art once and for all, it would change its name and just be a “performance biennial”. It would redouble its efforts to discretely identify who curated what and why they curated it, and they would open up the critical discourse about the work to more substantive interrogation. And it would at least try to become W.A.G.E. certified.

For those who aren’t familiar with the organization, W.A.G.E stands for “Working Artists and the Greater Economy.” It is a New York-based activist group that focuses on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions, and establishing a sustainable model for best practices between cultural producers and the institutions that contract their labor.

The Brooklyn Commune Project was greatly influenced by their work and the need for performing artists to organize in a similar way.

When, for Documenta 13, The MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst presented the first solo exhibition in a museum of the artist Andrea Büttner, artist Lise Soskolne from W.A.G.E. was invited to give a speech while seated at the same table as Documenta 13 artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. That speech was one of the most transfixing moments of Simon Leung’s ACTIONS! and I include it here, in an edited version:

> *W.A.G.E. stands for Working Artists and the Greater Economy. We’re a group of visual + performance artists and independent curators fighting for the regulated payment of artist fees by the nonprofit art institutions who contract our labor.*

So this is sort of a strange situation because the artist Andrea Büttner and Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art have generously invited W.A.G.E. to share in this very special meal inside of this important museum to talk about poverty and economic inequity in the art world.

W.A.G.E. is an activist group that addresses the role that non-profit art institutions play in preventing the artist's ability to survive within the greater economy by not paying us for our labor – so, W.A.G.E. may just indirectly bite the hand that is feeding us tonight.

And in this context there might appear to be some contradiction in our claiming impoverishment in the face of so much affluence, especially when we participate in the creation of wealth, and we benefit from it too.

How can we complain? Artists have the privilege of getting to do what we want, when we want, and how we want. And sometimes we get to present our work in great cultural institutions like this, in a space like this, and like this exhibition which has been mounted with such care and sensitivity that it affirms that what we make together – as artist and institution – has little to do with the creation of wealth.

So it seems kind of inappropriate in such a place and at such a moment and in such company, to talk about the fact that it has everything to do with the creation of wealth, and that this wealth is unequally distributed. And that most of the time artists don't receive any form of compensation for their work, and that most of us – while being culturally affluent – live in relative material poverty.

So it's exactly because this is the wrong moment and the wrong place to address it, that W.A.G.E. has been invited to speak here. And if I chose not to speak about inequity with candor tonight out of deference to the museum and the opportunity it has afforded me in being here, I'd be enacting the very relation that W.A.G.E. is working to overturn.

Demanding payment for services rendered and content provided is not an act of disrespect and there should be no shame in it. To bite the hand that feeds us because it's not feeding us what we deserve and need in order to live, and because it feeds us at its own arbitrary discretion, is really just to break with a relationship that is inequitable.

W.A.G.E. is focused on regulating the payment of artist fees because they are the most basic transaction in the economy of art. A fee is a rudimentary, crude and confused form of remuneration that bears no resemblance to the value of cultural labor today.

Artistic labor supports a multi-billion dollar industry and yet – there are no standards, conventions or regulations for artist compensation. We sometimes receive artist fees if we ask for them, or they're dispensed at the discretion of the institution. As compensation for the work that we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction, that sounds a lot like charity to us.

And charity is a transaction.

But W.A.G.E. believes that charity is an INAPPROPRIATE transaction within a robust art economy from which most get paid for their labor and others profit greatly, and we believe that the exposure we get from an exhibition does not constitute payment. We provide a work force. We refute the positioning of the artist as a speculator and call for the remuneration of cultural value in capital value.

We expect this from non-profits precisely because they are non-profit. They are granted special status because they serve the public good. This also means they're not subject to the laws of supply and demand for their survival. Instead they receive subsidies – charity, in fact – to do their work. A non-profit is by definition a public charity.

A public charity also has a special moral status because it seems to operate outside of the commercial marketplace – it isn't subject to what profit demands from the rest of us. It doesn't have to compromise its ethics for the sake of capital.

Paradoxically though, it is this very moral authority that imbues artworks and artists with economic value in the commercial marketplace. The logic is that if it's exhibited in a museum, it must have value beyond commerce – and it is exactly this perception which adds value to art when it reaches the commercial auction and sales markets.

Moral authority also enables the nonprofit to raise money. The money that non-profits receive from the state, private foundations and corporate sponsors is given to them with the contractual obligation that they will use it to present public exhibitions and programs.

That's what the money is given to them for.

The non-profit is a public charity but it is not a charity provider and artists are not a charity case because we earn our compensation – just like the director, the curator, and the graphic designer.

A non-profit art institution is an economic anomaly in the free market because it maintains an unusual position in relation to profit and the role profit plays in determining wages. If it's true that wages are often kept low in order to maximize profit, then there is a real opportunity here – since profit is not the goal – to set wages in terms of their real value, and in direct relation to the cost of living.

So, Artists: you also bear some responsibility in this equation. Don't tell yourself that you're lucky to be having an exhibition. You were subcontracted to produce content for an institution that receives charity for exactly that purpose. Exhibiting your work at an institution is a transaction. Even if 50,000 euros are being spent to produce your artwork, that 50,000 euros has been budgeted for, and an artist fee should also be budgeted for separate from production costs so that you can pay your bills – just like the salary of the person who wrote the budget, the salary of the person who did the fundraising, and even the person who donated the funds – they got a tax break. None of this is luck: it's a system.

Institution, W.A.G.E. doesn't accept your claim of being a charity when you fundraise and a Capitalist when you design your budgets. W.A.G.E. challenges you to use your moral authority and special economic status to set new standards for the compensation of labor.

Institution, have we bitten your hand? Have we shamed you into understanding why we can no longer accept being written out of the economic equation?

If so, maybe this was in fact the right place and the right moment to have done so.

The truth of the situation is that artists – regardless of discipline – are systematically exploited by many of the institutions that purport to work in their service and for the public good. It may not be intentional, it may be just a condition of working in an environment of scarcity – but it is a fact, one that needs to change, because this exploitation is part of a larger, systemic crisis of values and imagination.

For change to happen, we must build a broad-based coalition of artists across disciplines, one of mutual respect for skill, craft and labor. We need to actively change the aesthetic criteria that reinforce devaluation of skill and labor and reframe our aesthetic priorities to align with our values. We need to build a movement that is not just for artists, but for all of society, where creative expression is a human right and artistic pursuits are considered a necessary component of a thriving, sustainable society.

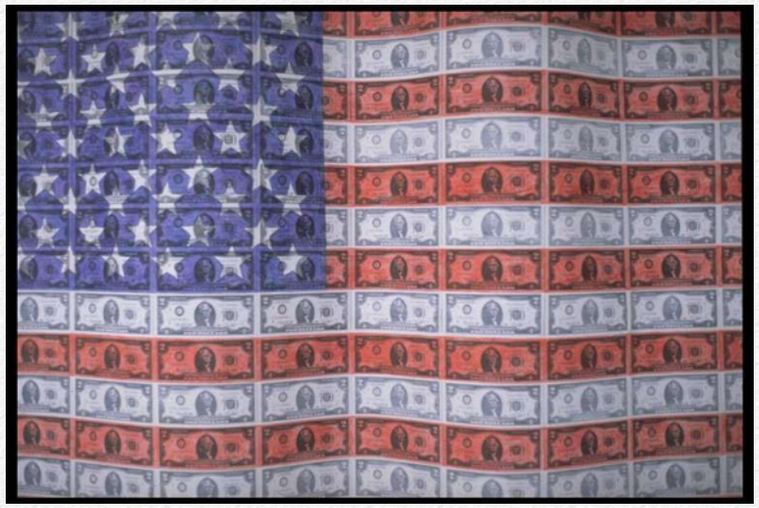
I was inspired by, and continue to be inspired by the work of W.A.G.E, Simon Leung, the MoMA strikers and all the artists coming from visual art contexts. The Brooklyn Commune Project is devoted to exploring the economic dilemma in the performing arts and we hope that we can all come together in solidarity to discover what we have in common, to move beyond institutionally and academically imposed divisions, and co-create a new, better, world for artists and everybody.

On Cultural Production



Funding The Arts in America, Michael Kaiser and the 1% // The Politics Of Cultural Production In Theater (Or, Devise This!), Part I // The Politics Of Cultural Production In Theater (Or, Devise This!), Part III // Detroit and Other Apocalypses // And lose the name of Elsewhere in the Shooting Gallery at BAM's Fisher Space // This is America, Now (A Frame for APAP) // Whites Only (or, WTF is the deal with diversity in the performing arts?)

Funding The Arts in America, Michael Kaiser and the 1%



Ron English, "Money is the Root of All Art", 1994

Okay so I've been thinking about a lot of different things, all of which deserve much more rigorous investigation than I can manage at the moment, what with my full-time job, trying to see work in NYC and, you know, trying to have a personal life (ha!). But I wanted to at least get some of these thoughts out there and expand on them, over time, as I gather more information. The conversations that happen in the comments section – complete with links, references, etc. – are really valuable and we are so grateful to the community for engaging in thoughtful discussion on these important issues. Please keep it going!

So first I want to talk about money. Every day on my way to work I would pass Occupy Wall Street and I would think about all the artists I knew that were there, who were posting about it on FB and talking about it at parties and on the street. I would stop by Zucotti every once in a while to see what was going on and found it alternately inspiring and frustrating. I am the 99% and I am, fundamentally, a progressive leftist who believes in the strategic redistribution of wealth for the stability and enhancement of society for the greater good. (See this New Yorker article on Brazil, excerpt available, *subscription required* for full access.) I believe we should talk – and do something – about income inequality and that the government should hold the banks and financial services industry accountable for their recklessness and irresponsibility. But as "socialist" as my leanings are, we – especially artists and people working in the arts – can't and mustn't ignore the fact that if it weren't for corporations and the financial services industry, there would probably not be any arts in America to speak of.

The government isn't investing enough to support an arts infrastructure in America. Check it out – the NEA's 2012 funding request was as follows:

> *The National Endowment for the Arts requests a budget of $146.255 million for FY 2012, a reduction of $21.245 million or 13% from FY 2010 appropriated levels and an amount consistent with that appropriated to the NEA in FY 2008.*

of which $28.063 million is for salaries and expenses. So that means that the NEA is distributing approximately $118.192 million in funds to support the arts *in all 50 states of America*. That's approximately $2.36 million per state. To give a sense of perspective, BAM's annual budget is in the $25 million range and PS122′s is, roughly, in the $1.3 million range.

NB: Full range of NEA financials are available here. And if you aren't already familiar, you can check out any non-profit's financials at Guidestar. (Always a good idea when donating money, researching institutions or job-seeking!)

I'm fortunate enough to live in NYC where the DCA (under the impressive leadership of the indomitable Kate Levin) is incredibly supportive. NYSCA too. If I lived in Kansas, I'd be pretty worried. So arts funding from the public sector, either nationally or on the state and local levels, is unreliable at best.

So then we have foundations – where would the arts be without foundations, large and small? They're absolutely, vitally important to the arts ecology and they play an incredibly important role in advancing non-market-driven agendas. They support all kinds of projects – not just arts – that are significant, meaningful and vital for a civil, democratic society. Some foundations are conservative, some more liberal, you may

not agree with all of their priorities and strategies, but without the philanthropic sector, America would be a much poorer place culturally. But remember – the "gift economy" and corporate economies are directly related. Most foundations, if not all, (and many arts organizations as well) have endowments, which are essentially reserves of capital managed through investment portfolios. Endowments are financial mechanisms for the growth of capital, and a foundation is obligated to spend something like 5% of their returns on their programs. (I am not a financial whiz, but I'm reaching out to some people who are to try and get more thorough data. I hope to share my findings in the new year.) So foundations and other organizations that have endowments rely on the health and success of the financial services industry to do their work.

I was employed at a foundation when the market crashed in 2008 and we had to suspend most of our programs because our endowment was "under water" – we literally had no money to give away. This was a Jewish foundation and when the market crash was followed by the Bernie Madoff scandal it was devastating. Fortunately our foundation hadn't invested with Madoff, but many Jewish philanthropies had and they were crippled, if not entirely destroyed.

So there's an interesting situation here – any artist who seeks or accepts a grant from a foundation is, indirectly, being supported by the financial services industry. As an artist should we be concerned or considering the investment strategies of the foundations who support us? Who are they investing in? Who manages their money? We know that fluctuations in the market affect a foundation's ability to distribute capital, but do their investment portfolios – and advisors and relationships – influence programmatic and strategic initiatives? If we are politically opposed to the policies of a given corporation or investment firm, are we complicit when we benefit, even indirectly, from their profitability? What if you found out that the grant you just received came from a foundation that was heavily invested in Halliburton? Food for thought.

And finally we have corporations. Many large corporations – Chase, American Express, etc. – have philanthropic programs that support the arts. I haven't been able to adequately do the research but I am going to guess that corporate philanthropic spending in the arts dwarfs the funds distributed by the NEA. If you factor in the non-philanthropic expenditures on culture (event sponsorships, etc.), corporate support of the arts is probably the single largest source of funding in the country. The arts sector as we know it would literally not exist without corporate support.

(Funny side note – I was talking to an arts manager who has been in the business for over 40 years and she was telling me how back in the day when Philip Morris was a major sponsor of BAM and other institutions, you would go to parties and events and they would have free cigarettes out on the tables next to the wine and hors d'oeuvres. Can you imagine?!)

So as artists and cultural workers we should probably think about how our work is supported, who is supporting it and what that means to us. I'm not at all suggesting that we shouldn't be critical of "the system" – we absolutely should and must – but we need to acknowledge where these worlds intersect, how they interrelate and what the implications are.

Which leads me to Michael Kaiser, his engagement with "the system" and his thoughts on the perils of citizen criticism.

Kaiser's DeVos Institute of Arts Management is funded by Dick DeVos, billionaire heir to the Amway fortune and Republican heavyweight. (h/t to commenter Richard Kooyman for pointing this out.) DeVos has been active in right-wing groups such as the Council for National Policy and The Conservative Caucus. Kooyman also says that the Koch Brothers are supporters of the DeVos Institute, but I have not been able to find documentation of their support.

My instinct is that if Kaiser is being funded by Republican businessmen then their values and worldview are going to influence the management training. I'm still trying to acquire Kaiser-generated materials to study (please send me some if you have taken Kaiser training) but from what I've read on Kaiser's blog, and as I mentioned before, he seems to be coming from a place of privilege that does not acknowledge the facts on the ground for most arts orgs in America. He seems to apply Kennedy Center models to organizations that do not have the capacity, resources or connections to actually implement them. It also tends to privilege institutions that support Ballet, Opera, Symphonies, etc.- the most conservative, institutions that primarily present the work of the White, Western, Male canon. Which is fine, but it

also reinforces the elitist model of arts presenting where the educated, wealthy and privileged provide institutionally-approved "culture" for the betterment of the masses.

Interestingly, I found an article about BAM's new Professional Development Program that will reside in the soon-to-open Richard B. Fisher Building. It is being run by BAM along with the DeVos Institute of Arts Management with the support of the Brooklyn Community Foundation and the New York Community Trust. It is designed to "aid Brooklyn arts groups looking to mount a self-produced performance in the [Fisher Building]'s new Judith & Alan Fishman Theater Space, and enable them to develop a set of capacity building skills in areas key to their success. The program will focus on the growth and training of each organization as a whole—offered at no fee to participants—and provide a new level of support, not previously offered in Brooklyn, that culminates in a performance."

Interesting model – providing local arts groups training in management so that they can grow enough to afford to self-produce at BAM. While I question that in and of itself, (the whole rental vs. presentation issue, etc. etc. – too much to go into here without losing my mind in frustration), I also wonder about Kaiser's ability to adapt his Big Institution model to the sorts of groups that the BAM program will be engaging. Kaiser recently wrote a post on his blog called "Fundraising: the Dilemma of Organizations of Color" in which he asserts:

In fact, as a proportion of their funding, arts organizations receive too much from foundations. These important institutions are overly reliant on foundation and government support. Their bigger weakness is in raising funds from individual donors. Individual donors are the bedrock of American arts funding, giving more than 60% of the money received by arts organizations. Yet the average African American, Latino, Asian American or Native American arts organization receives less than 10% of its funding from individual donors.

I agree with the fundamental idea that arts orgs should focus more on individual donors than on foundation and government support. Art should be supported by, and speak to, their community. But Kaiser seems to elide the very real problem that many orgs of color come from – and serve – disadvantaged populations for whom philanthropic giving is not a reasonable, or likely, expectation. Additionally, some communities do not have a deeply ingrained culture of philanthropy. Some minority communities don't have a long enough history of stable wealth accumulation to support philanthropic giving and some communities, from what I have heard from colleagues working in "Organizations of Color", just don't prioritize philanthropy. Even when a member of that community "makes it", there is very little cultural precedent or pressure to "give back", at least to the arts. (This is anecdotal, I welcome more information from the field.)

Kaiser goes on to say:

> *As a result, the size of arts organizations of color is bounded and they tend to experience wide swings in funding, especially during bad economic times. Because of this, there are very few large, stable arts organizations of color in our nation. Apart from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater it is hard to think of any. And Ailey has been remarkably successful building its individual donor base, a testament to the skills of its Executive Director Sharon Luckman. Sharon recognized early on that the key to a strong individual fundraising effort is a strong board and she has worked relentlessly to engage strong board members and other individual donors. This is unusual for arts organizations of color* ***whose boards tend to resemble community service organizations rather than fundraising boards****. [Emphasis mine] In fact, the boards of diverse organizations typically include numerous leaders from other not-for-profit institutions (educators, pastors, political groups) for whom raising money for their own organizations is a priority. The Ailey organization, under Sharon's leadership, has successfully broken this mold and has reaped the benefits. Any leader of a diverse arts organization would do well to study her work with Ailey over the past twenty years.*

There's a reason why many Organizations of Color have boards that look like they do. Because many of them start *in communities* and aim to serve their communities.

They generally don't have access to the 1% or their community equivalents. They don't go to the same schools, or live in the same neighborhoods and rarely network at, say, The Sun Valley Conference. Ailey's strategy just won't work for many of these organizations, because they're not making work or presenting work that will be shown at Kennedy Center, etc., and thus be exposed to those donors. They're making and presenting work in their communities, for their communities. So how do you develop a strategy that might actually work for them? And this isn't even going into the whole issue of support (and management models) that are relevant to developing, producing and presenting contemporary work in smaller arts organizations, where the Alvin Aileys of tomorrow are being incubated.

I don't have enough direct experience or exposure to Kaiser and his methodology to adequately critique it. But from what I've heard anecdotally from other arts professionals, boards love him and then bring that back to the administrative and artistic leadership, frequently creating a disconnect between expectations, capacity, program and organizational culture. I'm all for bringing sound business practices and strategies into the arts sector, but it requires entrepreneurial innovation and nimbleness, more like a start-up than a huge corporation. But it seems that Kaiser's intent is grooming the next generation of Kennedy Center-style leadership that will propagate a similar model and set of biases. I really don't see how this will help the overall ecology of America's vital, diverse and dynamic, multilayered arts landscape.

Finally, I want to bring this back to my earlier response to Kaiser's HuffPo article on the "Death of Criticism". Just as the visual arts world has a huge infrastructure devoted to creating value around art objects, so too do the large performing arts and music institutions have a structure for creating perceived value. No one is denying that symphonies, ballets, operas and traditional theater have great merit and that the classics of Western Literature and Art should be taught, studied and produced. But their continued cultural value is dependent on an academic and "critical" infrastructure that ensures that the audience is informed of exactly why it is important. Also, these traditional works of the Western canon have the advantage of being created, largely, by people that are now dead. No pesky live artists making troubling statements about politics, or sexuality, or racism or income inequality. But there will always be an audience for the classics of the canon – Kaiser and his acolytes will make sure of that, because they are deeply invested in maintaining a critical infrastructure that supports their conservative taste and values.

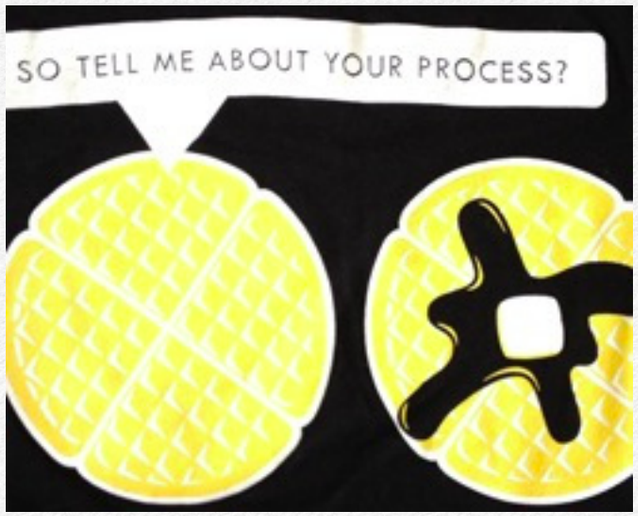
The rise of the citizen critic undermines cultural hegemony. I agree with Kaiser to some extent – in a world where anyone can be a "critic" there are going to be a lot of people who offer uninformed, unsophisticated opinions. Just look at the work that won the Grand Rapids ArtPrize by popular vote (funded by DeVos!) – a huge stained glass Jesus mosaic. Nice. But to dismiss public discussion by educated and informed writers – often arts professionals, artists, writers and aficionados themselves – is irresponsible at best, elitist, dismissive and destructive at worst.

When Kaiser talks about "critics" at mainstream publications that are "vetted" by editorial staff, he perpetuates a long-outdated myth. It has been a long time since newspapers – especially local newspapers – have "vetted" their arts writers. He places a lot of faith in the intellectual acumen of, well, *newspapermen*. Rupert Murdoch is a newspaperman – and he doesn't seem to have done a very good job of vetting anybody. The fact is that the age of Kenneth Tynan is long gone and the notion of serious criticism in mainstream papers is quaint. Most of today's arts writers in major newspapers – with a few exceptions (Hi Claudia, Gia and Alastair!) – are not critics but reviewers. At least in terms of what they publish in those outlets. Their job is not to engage with the larger ideas and aesthetic considerations, history, meaning and context of work being presented. Their job is to tell the ticket-buying public whether it is worth the money and time to see a show. Critics from academia like Bonnie Maranca, Carol Martin, Tom Sellar, Andre Lepecki, *et al*, are invaluable to our conversation. Unfortunately these kind of writers aren't even factored into Kaiser's thinking.

Admittedly every web browser should probably have some kind of "Caveat Emptor" button that would help you distinguish the good sites from the bad – but the ideas, information and conversations generated by Citizen Critics are a vital component of creating sustainability for the arts in America. The only reason to find this "scary" – as Kaiser does – is that it represents a challenge to his authority as an arbiter of cultural value and a purveyor of conservative models of arts engagement.

We can do better.

The Politics Of Cultural Production In Theater (Or, Devise This!), Part I



The other day I was in conversation with a director I had never met before. She was describing a project she was developing and she already knew what the end product was going to be: an issue-oriented multi-character solo show combining the writer/performer's original first-person text with interviews conducted in a community. The director didn't know my background and so took great pains to ensure that I understood that they didn't have a script yet, that what they were making was *devised* theater, not that other, *regular* kind of theater. That was the moment I knew something I had long suspected – nobody knows what anyone else is talking about when he or she uses the word "devised".

"Devised" seems to have recently become a catchall buzzword meant to imply almost any kind of theater that seeks to differentiate itself from "the mainstream". The term has been widely adopted by traditional theater makers and institutions with very little sense of its origin, meaning or implications. Under the best of circumstances the term is well-intentioned shorthand, a signifier for young literary managers held captive within the moldering walls of TCG-style Regional American Theaters to represent new work to their aesthetically conservative, culturally provincial, cautious, timid and aging artistic directors. At worst the term is a sham, a marketing tool for audiences and funding initiatives alike to create the appearance of innovation and transformation while reinforcing the existing power structures of cultural production. It is an appropriation of the language of the new, absent the means to enact meaningful systemic change.

At a moment when theater in America is so desperately in need of *real* change, it is troubling that passionate, well-meaning people naively employ the signifiers of experimentalism while failing to assimilate the lessons found in this rich lineage. Just calling something devised, ensemble, collaborative, immersive or site specific doesn't actually make it so. One fears that large, well-funded institutions are using these terms – often interchangeably – in much the same way that they tend to co-opt the language of "social practice" to embark on "community engagement" initiatives without actually adopting the best practices of the discipline. In light of this, it seems like an appropriate moment to define terms and endeavor to provide clarity.

Since "devised" is a term of British origin, I began by reaching out to my friend and Culturebot contributor Avia Moore who earned an MA in Devised Theatre from Dartington College of Arts in Devon, England. After a long chat, she graciously reached out to her mentor, Dr. David Williams, who sent along the following notes on devising, saying, "I wrote them a while ago, maybe 2005 – they emerged from a sense of an ethos at Dartington, the project of devising as part of trying to live creatively."

> ***DEVISED THEATRE*** *seeks to draw upon the facilities and energies of particular groups in particular contexts to create forms and materials. Personnel and context constitute one of the primary starting points; these are active raw materials and triggers. These people, this place, this time: what are the processes, materials and forms they produce?*
>
> *COLLABORATION*
>
> *Devised theatre is concerned with the complex negotiations and possibilities of collaboration and ensemble work: micro social*

models of interactivity, locating roles, functions within a group, working languages, sites for exploration, methodologies etc.

THE PERFORMER

In devised theatre, the performer is conceived as a multi-functional 'artist maker', thinking through performance. In devised theatre, materials arise out of the individuals making up a particular group. What are each person's particular abilities, facilities, fascinations, difficulties, etc.? In what ways can the performers themselves be enabled to 'flare into appearance'? What are the relations between individual and group? (All of this has implications for how we might consider 'acting').

TECHNIQUES

Devised theatre emphasises generative techniques: improvisation, task work, writing, scores etc. It draws on a range of historical and existing models (e.g. avant-garde movements of the 20th century, physical theatre, site-based and environmental art, dance theatre, 'visual theatre', live art, digital/new media art forms, installation), as well as the possible, the invented, the hybrid. The use of a wide range of materials (textual, visual, auditory, spatial, sensory, technological) and disciplinary discourses (ethnography, archaeology, psychoanalysis, history, geography etc) serve to widen the notion of what can be creative 'grist for the mill'. It also emphasises praxis: the ongoing and dynamic connection/dialogue between theory and practice.

COMPOSITION

Composition: starting-points > generation of basic material > sifting/working the material > composing larger structures > arrangement in performance context: i.e. ground-up decision-making processes in terms of forms, with reference to aesthetic, social, political frames of reference, and wider contexts of art making in an expanded field of contemporary performance practices. What are the implications of space, time, narratives, imagery, spectators etc. in terms of these materials this group this context? All work arises from particular personnel, contexts, and present concerns.

REFLEXIVITY

Devised theatre constantly calls 'theatre' and its own processes/ practices/ representations/assumptions into question. Reflection upon ongoing process and its decisions as part of the making process itself: a self-reflexive theatre. This is the heart of the notion of 'thinking through performance', i.e. performance and its processes as sites for 'the dance of thought-in-action' (Barba).

MULTIPLE END POINTS & APPLICATIONS

In devised theatre, there are many pre-existing models and forms (from dance, dance-theatre, community theatre, French creation collective, agit-prop/guerrilla theatre, physical theatre, etc.). But these are always to be reassessed and reinvented contextually; no single normative end-point is assumed. If a drama school funnels individuals towards an assumed goal in an existing

industrial niche, in devised theatre training a fan of possibilities opens up, both existing and to be invented.

And as “devised theater” was taking root in England, America had Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s The Living Theatre, inspired by Artaud among many others, that subsequently gave birth to The Open Theater under the direction of Joseph Chaikin and snowballed from there. And everybody ended up responding to Grotowski.

So when we talk about “devised theater” in America we are, in fact, talking about an enormous range of techniques, aesthetics and possible outcomes predicated on “a range of historical and existing models…as well as the possible, the invented, the hybrid.” The central unifying principles of devising are that “pre-existing models are to be reassessed and reinvented contextually; no single normative end-point is assumed” and that devising “emphasises praxis: the ongoing and dynamic connection/dialogue between theory and practice.”

Hence a work of devised theater could, conceivably, end up looking exactly like a well-made play or traditional American suburban backyard play, but it would be intentional, not by default or lack of imagination and interrogation. The actual philosophy of “devised” theater development exists so completely in opposition to the reigning practices and values of cultural production in the American Theater as to defy any possibility of integration or innovation – but more on that later.

As traditional theater practitioners move into “devising” and initiate investigations into their own generative practices, it may be helpful to look at how different artists currently aggregated under the category of “devised” actually make their work.

TO BE CONTINUED …

[This is Part One of a three part series on the background, terminology, practices and implications of "non-traditional" theater.]

The Politics Of Cultural Production In Theater (Or, Devise This!), Part III



[This is Part III of III. Part I is available here. If you've been following Culturebot, you may be asking what happened to Part II? The answer is I skipped it for now. Coming out of our discussions at The Public Theater during Under The Radar and Dave Malloy's subsequent manifesto I felt compelled to focus on Part III that examines the existing structure of cultural production in American theater. Even this is barely sufficient to cover the topic and I've had to leave whole sections on the cutting room floor. So more to come on this, and Part II, which will examine the variety of practices of contemporary American theater-makers currently being indiscriminately referred to as "devised", will follow in due time.]

The night before Culturebot's Long Table on The Politics of Cultural Production at Under the Radar I sat nursing a drink in The Public's swanky new restaurant lounge waiting for a show to start in Joe's Pub. It was a very Manhattan moment – young, shiny, happy, beautiful young(ish) professionals out on the town in a swanky lounge upstairs while downstairs the less shiny and well-off but equally happy, young and beautiful artists and audiences of Under The Radar were having a throw-down dance party in the black box theater with cheap beer and Reggie Watts on the turntables.

Part of me was happy for The Public, that they'd successfully attracted a new generation of upscale young professionals to replenish the audience base. I was happy too because I had just found out that Meiyin Wang is heading up The Public's new theater initiative to foster the development of devised, ensemble and non-traditional theater. It's all good: The Public is taking the lead to make necessary changes for a modern world and these new audiences will be exposed to new theater and a rising tide raises all boats, etc.

At the same time I was conflicted because these "non-traditional" processes of theater-making have histories and have ethos. Collective or collaborative creation as we recognize it today originated outside the institution. It arose as an alternative to the institutional structures of mainstream theater, in deliberate opposition to the institution and its values. Collaborative work seeks to address essential questions of how we make theater, why we make theater and how, as artists, our work can embrace, embody and convey our values, our vision of the world as we would like to see it. This type of work has never been about trends or marketing or "branding" your theater company to be "the new thing" and I fear that somehow this ethos will get lost as ensemble practice moves from outside the institution to inside buildings like the Public's shiny, new high-gloss edifice, sexily re-branded and aggressively marketing its new content and image to new audiences.

The next morning at the Long Table, Pig Iron's Dan Rothenberg shared a story about working as a director-for-hire at a regional theater where the cultural clash between "non-traditional" practice and mainstream theater proved to be a real challenge. It not only impeded the development of the production but revealed a vast chasm between these worlds. By the end of the Long Table pretty much all the gathered participants, from Paul Zimet to Lisa Kron to Clyde Valentin to Oliver Butler to Tina Satter & Jess Barbagallo talked about how they first came to make theater by finding people that they clicked with and started making work that spoke to their shared values, world views and temperaments. The way that they work, their processes, emerged from those relationships, shared values and visions, not exterior production models predicated on institutional priorities.

That's what I want to address here: the profound differences between the creative and production processes of mainstream institutional theaters and the system that supports them vs. "non-traditional" devised, ensemble and experimental companies. These systemic differences are rooted in values, histories and practices and often manifest in aesthetics. What are these differences and what do they mean? And as mainstream institutions begin to embrace this work as part of a larger strategy to gain new audiences, what are the possibilities and pitfalls when the aesthetics of ensemble and "non-traditional" theater-makers are adopted by institutions?

Of late I have been promulgating the idea that contemporary artistic practice in all disciplines is characterized by adherence to two values: investigation and interrogation. I will go into this more fully later but briefly, contemporary work starts with a question not a statement and by definition interrogates the underlying assumptions of its context, content and processes.

Experimental theater also engages in acts of questioning: what if we make this work in a different way? What if the audience/performer relationship is renegotiated? What if we changed what we think "acting" is? What would Paradise Now look like? What really happened in the Garden of Eden and why does that story still resonate with us? What is the relationship between embodiment and mediation? What is the relationship between narrative, story, text and performance? This process of questioning leads, then, to presentations that resist traditional forms, that embrace formal and aesthetic innovation.

Whether we call it devised or experimental may be more semantic than practical, but in either case I would posit that the flourishing of these ideas and practices in the 1960s is directly related to the social and political climate of that moment. The interrogations into the assumptions of the status quo and the questioning of the authority of institutions are radical and deeply enmeshed in the proposition of devised theater: these people, this place, this time – what shall we make? It starts from a question with no predetermined outcome and no predetermined process, it starts with a question and also a challenge: what does it really mean to be here *now*, to be present *now*, with these people, in this place, knowing what we know and questioning what we think we know? What does this moment in time and space demand from us and we from each other? As people, as artists, as citizens? Take nothing for granted, interrogate everything, begin again, dare to be empty, to be open and receptive, to be the uncarved block, to be transparent, to start from the beginning every time. And that is a hard road.

When I was in college there were, and I assume still are, undergraduate theater students of a certain ilk for whom Joseph Chaikin's *The Presence of the Actor*, along with Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre* and Julian Beck's *The Life Of The Theatre* form a kind of foundational literature for experimental theater. But when it comes time to make that first show after graduation, it is likely they will enter naively and idealistically into collaboration with their friends inspired by Chaikin:

> *I have a notion that what attracts people to the theater is a kind of discomfort with the limitations of life as it is lived, so we try to alter it through a model form. We present what we think is possible in society according to what is possible in the imagination. When the theater is limited to the socially possible, it is confined by the same forces which limit society.*

The Presence of The Actor, TCG, 1991 (p. 22)

They may have missed what he writes later as he addresses the actors preparing for *The Serpent* in the spring of 1968:

> *The Open Theater is a miniature government as is any group or organization. It's always difficult because there is nothing harder than actually getting along with other people, except for getting along with yourself.*

The Presence of The Actor, TCG, 1991 (p. 102)

At the Culturebot Long Table, Paul Zimet was both funny and forceful when he reminded us that The Open Theater was not a democracy. It may have been collaborative, but Joe Chaikin was the visionary and the actors willingly deferred to him.

Inexperienced artists may well confuse collaborative or collective creation with total equality and fairness and find that first post-college project self-destructing amidst acrimony, enmity and strife or accomplished at the cost of friendships and trust. Innocence lost.

But if the group survives this first outing and learns to negotiate the interpersonal, professional and logistical challenges of making collaborative work in the real world, they may well live to create another show – and another after that and another and another and against all odds build something meaningful, resonant, enduring and true.

Collaboration in theater making, as in life, is the harder road. It takes a long time to learn that the path towards successful collective creation demands acknowledging the unique talents and expertise of each individual, allowing them to do their thing, trusting their competency, recognizing their contributions, knowing when to back off and when to push forward. Knowing the difference between when to listen and submit and when to fight for what you believe. It is not easy; it is a learned skill through which every ensemble develops its own culture and methodology. It is difficult and risky and a far cry from certain, but these processes hold within them the possibility of actual innovation, novelty and surprise that comes from real risk.

Given the political climate of the 60's that gave rise to many of the ideas informing today's devised and experimental theater, given that 60s artists were influenced by Brecht and other radical European theater makers going back to Jarry, it doesn't seem far fetched to suggest that the notion "These people, this place, this time – what shall we make?" might have been influenced by an idea first proposed by the French Socialist Louis Blanc and later popularized by Karl Marx: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Experimental theater that is developed through a collaborative, process-oriented approach intrinsically questions pre-existing hierarchies of labor. It values *how* we get there as much as where we arrive and involves a just and equitable distribution of labor in which the actors, designers, writer(s) and director negotiate and consent to organizational hierarchies through process, not by default assignations or traditional assumptions. Marx's quote in context is:

> *In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners:* ***From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.***

The act of making theater is *work*. If it is work then the people who make it are Labor and cultural production is as much a production process as making cars. The difference is that theater is also a performed art form, which means that it is ephemeral and thus cannot rely on materiality alone, cannot rely on the dependable properties of steel, aluminum, plastic and interchangeable parts. Like making a car, making theater has material costs – sets, costumes, lights, etc. – that can be estimated and managed. But it also requires a lot of skilled human labor – labor that must be compensated. In the auto industry the workers on the assembly line don't get paid as much as the guys who design the cars, or market the cars or build the business models or design the production and distribution systems. But then again an automobile, once it is built, doesn't require those assembly line workers to build the same car over and over again, from scratch, 8 shows a week.

In the mainstream system of cultural production of theater actors are assembly line workers, playwrights and directors are freelance automobile designers, artistic directors are top salesmen at regional car dealerships, executive directors are the owners of those dealerships and a coalition of national theater organizations and funders form the executive class – the Lee Iacocca class, if you will.

In this system we can think of regional theaters as akin to the regional car dealerships. With a few exceptions, they get their cars (plays) from New York, their workers (actors) from New York and the product development and distribution

system is largely designed in and controlled from New York. At least that's how it is today. But that is not how the system was meant to be.

My understanding, given the limited amount of time I have had to research this, is as follows.

Today's regional theater system is the end result of the Little Theater and Regional Theater Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. In the late 1800s theater owners nationwide colluded on ticket prices and content, essentially stifling innovation and the creation of meaningful, adventurous, artful new staged work while cinema began to offer competition to the grand spectacles of commercial theater. At the same time progressive reform movements wanted to address social issues and engage immigrant and disadvantaged communities.

Thus the Little Theater Movement started as an attempt to break free from the financial and aesthetic tyranny of theatrical creation, production and presentation dictated by the NYC-based theatrical syndicate. Little Theater sought to create and present local work using local artists that resonated with local audiences. The Theater at Hull House in Chicago is noted as being one of the first, if not the first, of the Little Theaters.

As Little Theaters – some community-based, some affiliated with universities – grew and professionalized, the Little Theater Movement evolved into a Regional Theater movement that employed more professional actors and sought subsidy through donors and subscribers, moving away from the traditional commercial model of "professional" theater.

From what I understand, the progressivism of the early 20th Century gave way to further cultural shifts brought about by the Depression and programs like the WPA. As WWII came to an end and the nation engaged in building infrastructure, the prosperity of the post-war boom saw unprecedented growth of the middle class and, one assumes, a demand for arts and culture fueled by the aspirations of this emerging segment of newly educated, newly prosperous pursuers of the American Dream.

Regional Theaters coming of age in the post-WWII industrial boom adopted the predominant industrial production model of the day. Over the past 30 years we've seen the "gift economy" grow to rival the corporate economy in size, sophistication and complexity. The sophistication required to manage large regional theaters grew along with the increasing corporatization of the philanthropic sector until the Regional Theater "movement" became an industry, one that is now over-professionalized, creatively stagnant, bloated, inefficient, and spectacularly off-mission.

One of the great ironies life holds for all of us is the ever-increasing likelihood that as we age we will become that which we rebelled against in our youth. Or as Perry Farrell once sang so poetically in Jane's Addiction "Idiots Rule", "You know the man you hate, you look more like him everyday…" And so today's regional theaters embody the very conditions they were created to confront. Over time these institutions have developed, if nothing else, elaborate mechanisms for their own self-preservation, to the point where their primary mission is to continue existing and not much else. They have become today's syndicate, ruled from NYC and stifling innovation, creativity and local talent. They are losing audience and prioritizing business over art.

I'm not an economist, but I'm guessing that in a normal marketplace a business that loses touch with its consumers and doesn't improve its product in response to the times would go under. In the non-profit world one could even look at funders as consumers who choose to invest their resources in arts organizations based on their missions. They acknowledge that mission-driven enterprises may not generate revenue, but they see other value in the institution's work and thus subsidize them.

But if an institution satisfies neither consumer group – audience or funder – one would think that they would *certainly* close up shop. We should be so lucky. There's too much at stake.

For example, let's return to the automotive industry idea for a moment and look at division of labor in the regional theater system from C-Level management on down.

Large regional theaters require large budgets, and since it takes money to raise money the highest paid person is always the Executive Director, usually followed by the Development Director. You're not just paying for his or her skills – anybody can write a grant. You're paying for their connections, their access to people with significant income to divert to philanthropic endeavors. A good Executive Director is being compensated for cultivating a sense of trust in donors. People who have a lot

of money – just like people who have less money – don't like to waste it and don't like to be taken advantage of, they expect their philanthropic investments to be as carefully tended as their profit-driven investments. If they know an Executive Director personally that's one kind of trust. But trust can also be gained through accreditation – an MBA or Master's in Arts Administration.

Here the trickle-down effect is in play. Each person down the ladder from the Executive Director is required to have accreditation and as the cost of acquiring credentials rises, salaries rise – though rarely at the same rate. Executive compensation tends to rise disproportionately to other administrative functions, and if the cost of acquiring credentials rises at a rate significantly higher than an entry level wage we end up where we are now: an industry where people acquire enormous student debt only to enter a labor market where starting salaries cannot support them. So the barrier to entry to a career in the arts is raised, limiting access to these positions to only those who can afford to intern or work for very low salaries because of some form of independent subsidy. The professionalization of cultural production demands accreditation at all levels, presenting itself as a meritocracy when in fact it is often only a thin veil obscuring a lack of accessibility determined by the inherent cultural biases of privilege. This has a lot to do with the lack of diversity in the arts, but that's a much larger essay for another time.

In a mission-driven sector committed to the development and presentation of content, I'd be willing to bet that some big institutions eat up $.80 of every dollar for administration and facilities expenses with $.10 going to new project development and $.10 going to presentation. It is a real disaster that top-heavy institutions accumulate a disproportionate share of resources and thus determine its allocation, with content creators at or near the bottom of the resource allocation pyramid. It is a hopeless scenario. Big institutions, by their very nature, stifle opportunities for content creators to acquire resources independently. At the same time they enforce a production model where content creators are at the mercy of the institution to be compensated for their work.

Admittedly market forces are at play and the supply of talent seeking work – writers, actors, directors and designers – greatly exceeds demand. But even that is more complicated than it seems, because the creative worker must go into debt to acquire accreditation to facilitate access to the institution's resources.

Risk-averse Artistic Directors who control resource allocation require creative workers who can reliably deliver content that adheres to accepted levels of product safety – a steady supply of preapproved, no-fail content vetted to ensure quality control. And how does a content provider demonstrate quality? Through the accreditation conveyed by an MFA or related degree from an approved institution of higher learning. (But not a PhD, because then you're an academic who no longer knows how to actually make theater, just write about it.) But let's face it – nobody needs an MFA to learn how to act. I'm sorry. You really, *really* don't. I'm not sure you need an MFA to write plays, frankly, or direct them. Unfortunately, you do need an MFA to get taken seriously to gain access to the regional theater system.

So here we are, in a sector devoted to the arts, down at the very bottom of the rung below executive leadership, below administrators: the content creators and "creative" labor – the playwrights, directors, designers and actors. No job security, no guaranteed income, and when they are paid, it is a pittance. Playwrights have told me they have gotten as little as $1800 for the rights to have a play produced at a regional theater.

If you think it's tough to be a playwright, don't even think about being an actor. Conservatories turn out thousands of actors every year who have no hope of finding gainful employment or employing themselves in their chosen profession.

There are 74 LORT theaters in the U.S. While there are many more self-designated regional theaters and even more independent theaters, the LORT tier is where a good chunk of the money is and where many Equity actors are going to seek employment. LORT's essential function is collective bargaining with Equity and other unions. So let's say each LORT member does twelve shows a year and each show averages five actors. That's 4,440 decently paid acting gigs in the US; but let's account for variation based on the big cast Christmas shows and the budget-crunch solo shows and call it 6,000. 6,000 jobs a year and the undergraduate drama program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts has about 1500 students enrolled at any given time. So let's say they graduate 300 per year and then let's speculate that there are ten other top tier drama schools of similar size. That's 3000 new actors flooding the market *every year*. Not to mention the other 300 MFA actors from the top ten leading national institutions. It is not only stupid and impractical, it is cruel, really, to have a conservatory system that cranks out thousands and thousands of young

people who have gone deeply in debt to train for jobs that don't exist and are rapidly disappearing and whose skills are not transferable to pretty much any other sector.

Given the vast number of content creators and actor/laborers vying for resources, how could a poor, overwhelmed artistic director ever manage to select the most reliable, quality workers? Someone has to provide additional vetting – thus writers, actors, directors and designers are all represented by agents; trusted brokers who can ensure the delivery of safe, reliable, familiar content that appears new enough and novel enough to display in the showroom as this year's model without questioning the underlying assumptions of the system.

The reliable content pipeline demands a spectacularly labyrinthine system of new play development where product is tested and revised and altered and edited until everyone involved feels comfortable that the product is sufficiently bland, familiar and inoffensive that it can't possibly create any problems anywhere in the United States. Even the so-called "controversial" shows are market-tested and approved, sold to audiences as "edgy" or "new" or "political", ensuring that the audience's preconceived cultural values are reinforced, their moral position affirmed, their comfort unperturbed and their experience in the theater innocuous and instantly forgettable.

Pity the naïve, idealistic writer, director, actor or designer who actually has an uncompromising vision of theater as art that might upset the apple cart, that might be difficult to watch or challenging to understand, that might be somewhat unfamiliar or new or unconventional.

But here's the thing: from time immemorial those naïve idealists have been responsible for changing the world. All the artists I most admire started outside the system; most of the best ones do. So I was surprised at the Long Table on The Politics of Cultural Production at Under the Radar when Lisa Kron said something about how artists were beholden to institutions for work. I didn't realize that even established artists who originally built their careers and reputations outside the system still felt that way.

Personally, I think there's more integrity in having a day job and only making the art you want rather than being a "professional" and having to compromise your vision for popularity's sake or box office revenue. But I very much understand the desire to get paid to do what you love.

Here's the truth: institutions need artists more than artists need institutions. Artistic Directors, Curators and Producers rarely admit this but many of them, when considering an artist, think about how much audience the artist already has. Some are different and go to bat for an artist because they truly believe in the artist's vision, some will split the difference, but many of them think quite a bit about how many people that artist is going to bring in the door, or is the artist in question "hot" and "marketable".

But in in the Internet age artists can get their work out to a vast audience cheaper, faster and easier than ever before. If you, as an artist, focus on getting your unadulterated vision into the world and find the audience for your work outside the system, you will be happier and more successful as an artist. Sometimes work will have wide appeal, sometimes it won't, times and tastes change. Regardless, you just have to keep doing what you're doing.

When artists start taking control of the development and dissemination of their creative output, the system will inevitably change. Ensemble work, collaborative creation, "devised" or "experimental" theater in the 21st Century creates change in two essential ways. First, it allows the group to take control of their life and art, to be the change you want to see in the world. If you want a collaborative, co-operative world, practice collaboration. If you want diversity and inclusion in the wider world, be diverse and inclusive in your practice and engagement. Use your art practice to model the world you would like to see and the art you create will reflect that. The time of waiting for the system to embrace or create change is over, the old top-down model doesn't work, so take the responsibility into your own hands.

This imperative for self-determination feeds into a wider conceptual shift in the way we think about cultural production as a whole. As I've said, the regional theater model – the dominant theatrical production model in the U.S. – is based on mechanical, industrial models. We live in the information age and as such should embrace 21st century models.

If art – particularly ephemeral art such as dance and theater – is meant to engage with our experience of the world as we live in it, and if the methods of production

affect the received and perceived meanings of the art, then our production processes should reflect the dominant model of our times.

Earlier I proposed that contemporary artistic practice is characterized by adherence to two values: investigation and interrogation and that these values are inherent in "devised" or "experimental" theater. I would further suggest that these characteristics are central to the knowledge production industries that define the Information Age. Thus we can look to the knowledge production industries for relevant models and frameworks to adapt to cultural production.

While this would consist of an entire treatise unto itself, I would like to suggest the following frameworks as a starting point:

> Iterative Processes: We have come to accept software development as an iterative process. Software is released in beta and is revised and updated over time. Every so often a new version comes out that is so significantly improved that it might require a new number or name, but the product itself is never really done. This is a useful framework for looking at the developmental process of theater – either a single show or the work of an artist over time. Rarely is a show every really done. Anyone who has worked in the theater knows how much a show changes from opening night to closing. With some shows that change can be astonishing as actors discover new moments and generate new material; as writers, directors and designers discover what works and what doesn't. So too with artists – we should look at them as engaged in a long investigative arc and try and see each work both on its own and in the context of what came before.

> Open Source: Open Source software development means that one person develops some code and gets it as far as they can on their own, then turns it over to a community of practice to revise, refine and improve the software. This framework is valuable both as a values system for collaborative creation on a single project and for the field at large. How can we look at what we do, as a field, as a collaborative process of imaginative investigation, of creating and re-mixing, sampling, revising and re-envisioning? How can we re-imagine our relationship to intellectual property and copyright?

> Peer Review: Scientists regularly publish their research that is subject to peer review. The current theater ecology places the responsibility for reviewing productions with a third party, journalists, who are meant primarily to serve as advocates and advisors to the ticket-buying audience. The arts sector – particularly theater – would be well served by vigorous, challenging, public review and critical discourse by peers. Audiences should be thought of not as mere consumers, but participants in a public conversation.

Here's the thing: the spark of an idea that we call inspiration, the thing that calls the artist forth to create regardless of seemingly insurmountable obstacles will forever remain unchanged. I believe that creativity and the individual creative process are at the very center of what makes us human. We live in existential isolation, trapped in our own experience, and the creative impulse is how we attempt to bridge the gap, to share what we think we see, hear, smell, feel and think with others.

But the processes through which these ideas are brought to life in the world, the value that is placed on them and the way the public at large engages with them change over time. The world is going through a period of extraordinary change; we are called upon to re-make it with new facts, new conditions, new economies and new realities. For those of us who are passionate about theater – or the performing arts generally – we need to jettison our old, inherited unsustainable habits and envision new structures for making, disseminating and evaluating work. The time is now to build new systems in support of the world we want to inhabit.

Detroit and Other Apocalypses



Carrie Brownstein and Wild Flag @ Celebrate Brooklyn

For most of September and into October I traveled around the country checking out performances. I was going to write it all up but I was so busy I didn't have the time. I also saw a bunch of shows in NYC and didn't get to write them up either. But with the election around the corner I've been thinking a lot about my travels from PICA's TBA Festival in Portland, OR to The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival to a dance platform in Minneapolis to the Headlands Arts Center in San Francisco and I've been thinking about America. I've been thinking about how America (and Americans) are presented on stage and what feels authentic, what reflects were we are today as artists. So I decided I had to take some time and link all this stuff together – at least the New York bits.

Back in the summer before I lit out for Portland, I was at the Wild Flag/Mission Of Burma/Ted Leo show at Celebrate Brooklyn and found myself standing next to Tim Sanford. In between the incredible rockitude of the bands (Carrie Brownstein=Supreme Badass Guitar Goddess of Immeasurable Awesomeness) we talked theater and Tim said I should check out Lisa D'Amour's *DETROIT*, soon to open the new season at Playwrights Horizons.

I hardly ever go to Playwrights Horizons but Tim has always been very nice to me and after our chat at the Wild Flag show I figured I'd check it out. I've known Lisa since about *Anna Bella Eema* and *Nita and Zita* era, from *How To Build A Forest*, the 8-hour installation/show that I heard so much about but managed to miss at The Kitchen and so forth. I had never actually seen any of her "play" plays and *Detroit* had been on the periphery of my awareness for a while. I remember hearing something about it being at Steppenwolf, that it almost went to Broadway, but not much else. So I was curious to see this work related to other things I had seen of Lisa's and what, if anything, was different. So I went and saw an early preview and called Lisa to chat. Unfortunately my computer ate the recording and so all I had were some sketchy notes and I also realized I didn't have much to say, so I kept putting it off until I found a wider context for it.

Detroit opens in the back yard of a nondescript suburban house in an unspecified location, a scenario that is at once familiar and uncanny. Throughout the play I kept waiting for it to "turn weird" the way downtown plays often do. But while it flirts with weirdness from time to time, mostly it stays on the straight and narrow. "It isn't a formal experiment in any way, I wasn't trying to deconstruct the 'white suburban backyard play,'" Lisa told me. "It was more about this situation. I was really interested in the idea of two couples and particularly the women. It is based on a lot of people I know, especially from my time in Minneapolis. I know a lot of women who grow up in these surroundings and don't have any models for how to live differently, Ben and Mary are those kind of people who managed to get through college, because that's what you do, they get 9-5 jobs and then don't quite know what to do or where to go from there. They sort of forget that maybe there was something else they meant to do, and then they don't know how to get out of it. And next door are Sharon and Kenny who aspire to a sort of stability, they have an idea of what that looks like, but they just kind of don't fit in."

With the two couples struggling in different ways with attaining – or maintaining – the American Dream, *Detroit* seems especially resonant in this climate, in an election season that seems to offer two very starkly different visions of America. Lisa told me, "It was first written in the beginning of the economic crash and now it is an election year, but it really hasn't changed much. It is interesting how it plays now - I'm not a political scientist or a historian, but it does seem that this is a conversation that we're having as a country – where do we go from here?"

It's a good question. And insofar as *Detroit* concludes with a kind of open ending where the lead couple stares at their burnt out house and imagines a possible future, it is ambiguously positive that something good will come from it all.

But as I left the theater I kept thinking about the larger implications of this production (not the play so much) and its context. Because of what I knew about Lisa as a theater maker, I went into the show thinking it was going to be some kind of interrogation of the form of the "suburban backyard play" and I kept waiting for that to happen. But it *really was* a suburban backyard play and though I know that Lisa actually knows the kind of people that were represented on stage, still something about the whole construct felt fantastically phony to me in the way that most mainstream theater predicated on psychological realism does. The problem is that psychological realism, or "naturalism", is merely a style of acting, one descended from Ibsen and Chekhov through Stanislavski to Strasberg and Adler and then metastasizing throughout the American Theater landscape. It has become so ubiquitous that theater makers and audiences have agreed that it is the singular style through which "the real" can be represented – and it makes me crazy. People don't talk like that, they don't behave like that and they don't deal with life like that. Naturalism is no more "natural" than kabuki – it is an unimaginative default mode of representation that is hardly up to the challenge of portraying the complexities of human behavior and experience in the 21st Century. Even if naturalism as a style adequately portrayed the authentic surreality of contemporary American life, most conventional plays don't manage to construct a world that even suggests the appearance of truth. They are far more likely to reference television-based constructs of what we perceive to be American life.

And not to go off on a too much of a tangent but last year The Debate Society had a residency at Playwrights to develop *Blood Play* and just last week Stein-Holum Projects (ex-Pig Iron artists with a pick-up company of current Pig Iron and local actors) had a residency there. Debate Society's *Blood Play* was fantastic (Birgit Huppuch!) and just extended a sold-out run at The Bushwick Starr. From the work-in-progress showing of the new Stein-Holum project about American politicians it looks like it is going to be awesome, too. Each in their own ways is more insightful, imaginative and adventurous than most of what happens at Playwrights. [Full disclosure, I'm on the board of the Debate Society and am close friends with the ladies of Stein-Holum.]

For that matter, I think that Lisa D'Amour has done much more interesting work than *Detroit* and I was kind of bummed that I didn't like it so much, because I really like Lisa and I really wanted to like her play. I was so excited that someone I consider a "downtown" writer with a really diverse practice – and a laudably down-to-earth approach to writing – was produced at Playwrights. I was thrilled that a major theater was willing to take a risk. But I guess they're not and I just can't wrap my head around why!? Why won't Playwrights Horizons actually stage the projects that they support with residencies or give edgier, more innovative projects a chance? From a business perspective I can guarantee that almost all of those projects would be cheaper to produce than their current choices. And I'll bet you the audiences would love to see something actually different. AUDIENCES ARE NOT STUPID. AUDIENCES ARE NOT SHEEP.

Anyway, so I didn't write the interview with Lisa but I kept thinking about this whole issue of the "Standard American Play" when I went to see David Levine's *Habit* as part of the Crossing The Line Festival. In case you haven't heard of the project, David is a theater director and visual artist whose work challenges the aesthetics of both disciplines. For *Habit* David commissioned scenographer Marsha Ginsberg to design a ranch house set in which a play would be performed – essentially rebuilding the fourth wall, turning the Standard American Living Room Drama into an art installation that the audience could wander around and look into, coming and going at will. He hired Jason Grote to write a kind of "everyscript" – a generic mix of every possible American Theater cliché from Shepard to Rapp to Wilson to whoever else these days is writing interchangeable texts exploring the monotony and pathos of everyday American middle class suburban life as viewed by people with MFAs from liberal east coast institutions. The 60-minute play is performed on a continuous loop

all day long so you can stay for a complete cycle or leave and come back or just watch a little and then do something else. It was fucking brilliant.

Levine actually managed to simultaneously interrogate and revive the form. I think David has great affection for traditional theater and he is disappointed in it as only a lover can be – he is disappointed at how poorly it does what it intends to do, how frequently it fails and how cowardly it is in confronting its own failings. Part of what is brilliant is that he leverages the self-interrogative, critical apparatus of the visual arts world to lay into both theater and visual art. He holds up the mediocre middle of the road suburban play and says to mainstream theater "Look! See!?" He is at once indicting mainstream theater for its obviousness and lameness and adherence to the hoary, outdated methodology of playmaking in the mode of psychological realism and celebrating what theater *can* be. The actors in the show were all fantastic and by making the play an art installation, by changing the mode of engagement from proscenium to exhibit, he allowed the audience to see how complicated the actor's job is, how complicated theater is *as a form*, and how underutilized that complexity is in the mainstream. At the same time he seems to be saying to the visual arts world, "This is everything you hate about theater, and now it is art. Suck it." Which I think is totally hilarious and fun.

Coincidentally, the day that I went to David Levine's *Habit* later took me out to Peak Performances at Montclair for *Dog Days*, a new opera by David T. Little. *Dog Days*, from a short story by Judy Budnitz, tells the story of a rural family in the wake of an unspecified apocalypse from the perspective of Lisa, a 13-year-old girl. In a way this seems to reference both *Detroit* and *Habit*, in that it is a variation or re-contextualization of the Standard American Play set in the suburbs.

The original short story is very much of a standard American genre and *Dog Days'* libretto was consistent with Jason Grote's "everyscript" for *Habit* – a generic mix of every possible American Theater cliché of the past 50 years. Steve Smith in the NY TIMES review wrote, "When was the last time a new opera got under your skin the way an Edward Albee play does?" A better question is when did an Albee play get under your skin the way it is purported to do? I suppose you could say just last week, as Albee is back on Broadway with *Virginia Woolf* – a show that premiered 50 years ago! But writing for the stage has evolved enormously over the past 50 years and there are many writers who "get under your skin" in more contemporary and innovative ways. Thus Smith's statement is doubly troubling, first that he thought *Dog Days* was edgy or challenging at all, and second that his point of reference for a provocative script was Albee.

It is peculiar that *Dog Days* and other "new operas" of similar style are being heralded as adventurous, innovative and "provocative" when they are anything but. Most of the "new opera" I've seen and heard is conventionally narrative, pleasantly tonal and traditionally staged. While I'm reluctant to speak to the compositional innovation and have generally enjoyed the music itself, the productions generally seem to be not much more than 18th century opera with synthesizers and video. The most innovative operas I've seen in the recent past were Robert Ashley's legendary work from the late-60s *That Morning Thing*, presented at The Kitchen as part of Performa11, Joe Diebes' *Botch* at HERE (which didn't identify as opera, but after seeing Ashley's piece, I talked to Joe and he conceded that he felt comfortable with that contextualization) and Two-Headed Calf's diptych *You, My Mother*, performed by Yarn/Wire Ensemble.

As for Smith and *Dog Days*, it is hardly innovative to introduce pedestrian language into opera, and librettist Royce Vavrek's text is a far cry from being as brutal, acerbic, witty or incisive as Albee's. Vavrek's naturalistic text is more suited to film and television than the stage and I find it puzzling, frankly, that this is being heralded as contemporary and provocative.

Not to give short shrift to Mr. Vavrek's talents – the writing isn't bad and I can imagine a situation where Mr. Vavrek's text would be incorporated into a different opera to great effect. But in this case the text did not correspond to the composer's powerful soundscapes or the epic reach of his sonic imagination.

I'm a life-long amateur musician with early training in voice, violin and piano, a self-taught guitar player and an omnivorous listener of all kinds of music, but I'm certainly not qualified to be a music critic. However, I have been exposed to enough music generally to feel that I have a modicum of discernment. Also, I've subsequently asked people more knowledgeable than myself for their thoughts and across the board everyone has confirmed my opinion that David T. Little's composition was excellent. And when the words and music matched, it was brilliant.

The most powerful scenes featured Lauren Worsham as Lisa. Vavrek has a real gift for capturing the complexity and contradictions of adolescent emotions, honoring their intensity while acknowledging their youthful naiveté. First was a beautiful twilight scene of Lisa under the living room table writing in her diary. She didn't sing at all, the worlds were projected on a screen in the back and the soundscape was ethereal and foreboding, a moment of respite before the horrors to come. It was stunning. Second was a scene where Lisa disrobes and examines her wasting body that has finally given her the cheekbones and figure of a model. Even as she is starving in a post-apocalyptic landscape she is tortured by the oppressive body ideals of consumerist culture. The music was unnerving, harrowing and beautiful, the words were heartbreaking and Ms. Worsham gave an extraordinary performance. It was in these scenes where Mr. Vavrek's skill came to the fore and where one could imagine what this production might have been.

Alas, the overall production did not live up to the expectations set by those scenes. I was seated in the orchestra down stage left. The set was designed so that there was a huge upturned couch in front of me, and a similarly huge dining room table downstage center. As a result most of the action onstage was obscured from my view. Pretty much anywhere one sat in the house something was sure to block your view of the rest of the stage. At the same time there were peculiarities of staging. The mother's most important aria, her emotional breakdown, her spotlight number, was performed three-quarters of the way upstage, blocked by a table and facing upstage left. I can't for the life of me figure out why one wouldn't bring her downstage center for her most important solo and a significant dramatic moment of the show. And I can't figure out why the set didn't have levels that would allow the audience to see things that happened in different parts of the stage. The music was wonderful, the performances powerful and expert and the creative team assembled for this production was stellar – Robert Woodruff is a well-known and well-regarded director, Alan Pierson is an exceptional conductor, musician and artistic director, Jim Findlay an innovative designer. And yet, in my opinion, it didn't cohere.

This leads me to the second reason I am troubled by Steve Smith's review. How can a thoughtful, knowledgeable music writer like Smith be so unaware of what is happening in the rest of the world of performance that the playwright he references is Albee? Not that Albee wasn't provocative in his time, or that his work has lessened in its impact, but so much has come since and *Dog Days* is being positioned as contemporary, so why not reference a contemporaneous authorial voice? The scene that Smith identifies as being most provocative is one in which Lisa washes her dead mother's corpse in her own urine. But it is not provocative – for better or worse I have seen much more upsetting displays in the plays of Thomas Bradshaw and the performances of Ann Liv Young, and much more artful provocation in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' plays and in Sarah Michelson's more challenging works. In another staging *Dog Days*' ablution scene might have been heart wrenching but here it was merely sensationalistic.

In my opinion the trouble with *Dog Days* is indicative of two larger problems in performance these days: a lack of dramaturgy and of cross-disciplinary knowledge. Many artists want to make multidisciplinary work but there are very few people who know how to help them develop it in a rigorous, dramaturgically sound way. As artists develop increasingly complex, multilayered projects that involve numerous collaborators and complicated technologies, there is a need for another viewer to be in the process looking simultaneously at the individual parts and the *gestalt*. Someone needs to interrogate the choices being made and advocate for coherence; someone needs to track the evolution of ideas and aesthetic choices, to measure change and to insure that decisions are intentional, not default. There is a need for someone to ask the hard questions and challenge assumptions, to see that choices made for visual design, set design, sound design, choreography, performances, composition (both musical and stage) and text are all building one world. That world can be dissonant, it can be disjointed, can be all kinds of things, but it must be thoughtfully assembled and articulated.

The lack of dramaturgy reinforces another flaw in the ecosystem – artists no longer have time to learn about each other's disciplines. The existing disciplinary silos and rigid, role-based hierarchies of production obstruct thoughtful collaboration. We live in a moment – especially in New York – where the professionalism of the arts and the gentrification of the city have created conditions that impede natural cross-pollination. To become a successful theater artist you have to be single-mindedly focused on achievement in the theater world – and it is the same with dance, music, visual art and media. People either are raised in the city or move to the city with their pre-existing networks (usually formed in college or grad school) and then focus on building a career in their discipline, within that social network. These become echo chambers of circular discourse where aesthetic provincialism is reinforced and

authentic critical dialogue stunted. The days of hanging out in someone's SoHo loft or the Cedar Tavern or Max's Kansas City and meeting all kinds of different artists are long gone. The days of drunken brawls and the public exchange of heated essays about big ideas are over. There is no Black Mountain College for today's artists to retreat to and wrestle with fundamental issues of time, space and perception; to ask the eternal, existential questions and challenge each other's preconceptions. That world has been mostly replaced by a culture of single-minded careerism in the worst case and, in the best case, a struggle for survival that precludes time for reflection, adventure, experimentation and play. Now when artists set out to create work across silos they no longer have a common language or even the passing familiarity with other disciplines that is needed to develop that language.

Back in September I flew back from the dance platform Minneapolis and went straight from the airport to BAM to see *Einstein On The Beach*. I have to admit, I was dubious. I've never had much of a taste for Robert Wilson's work; seeing it always feels like eating your vegetables or taking medicine – I know its good for me but I just don't like it. But *Einstein* stood up to the hype as both a product of its time and as being very much timeless. As John Rockwell wrote in The New York Times:

> *…"Einstein" was perhaps the proudest product of the extraordinary Lower Manhattan performing-arts scene in the 1970s. Its dreamy, painterly beauty; its mystical longueurs; its hypnotic music; its allusions to the brilliance and danger of Einstein's work without ever quite stooping to the mere telling of a story: all spoke to a generation that still exerts a powerful hold on American, and global, vanguard arts.*
>
> *"Einstein" was called an opera because Mr. Wilson liked to call all his big pieces ("The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin," "Deafman Glance" and others) operas. It was scored not for an orchestra but for the Philip Glass Ensemble, which consisted of two electric keyboards, three wind instruments and a wordless solo soprano, all exuberantly amplified by a rock-style sound mixer. There was a chorus but no opera singers.*
>
> *Instead, in 1976, a passel of SoHo artist-denizens both sang and danced, the singers dancing roughly and the dancers singing roughly. They sang numbers and solfège syllables. Otherwise Ms. Childs and Sheryl Sutton and a few others told elliptical stories and acted out slow-motion tableaus (Patty Hearst holding her rifle, the young Einstein and his wife on a train's caboose platform)…*

Seeing *Einstein* now you see three artists in their prime – a composer, a choreographer and a director/visual artist – collaborating to develop a shared language and a transcendent experience that upends our notions of music, theater, dance and opera. That SoHo moment allowed three master innovators of their disciplines to create something beyond what any one of them could have done alone, something that inexorably changed the way we receive performance.

As Rockwell notes, the lead artists brought people of all disciplines together, dancers sang and singers danced but without the whiff of deliberately artless amateurism that clings to so much contemporary visual art performance. All of these artists were exceptionally talented, rigorous and skilled in their own *métier* and only under these circumstances could they come together, venture into each other's territory and return with something so remarkable. Insomuch as *Einstein* is daringly interdisciplinary, it is also deeply integrated. It is a remarkable piece of clockwork and it astounds with its complexity, sheer force, scale and ambition. Glass's relentless score, Childs' intricate, geometrical choreography, Wilson's artful staging and the deliberately elliptical and opaque text set a challenging barrier to engagement, and yet…

I was jetlagged and exhausted and afraid I wouldn't make it after the first Trial scene and second Knee Play. Just when I thought I was a goner, Lucinda Childs' transcendent first Field Dance unfolded with precision, joy and exuberance. It opened up the piece and let some air in, gave me a second wind that sustained me through the rest of the show.

Getting to see *Einstein* made me finally realize why people celebrate Glass, Wilson and Childs. Not that I didn't appreciate their work previously, but experiencing this "opera" firsthand allowed me to imagine what it must have been like for audiences in 1976 when no-one had heard of these people nor seen work of this kind ever before.

It is worth noting (as Rockwell does) that:

> *"Einstein" was commissioned by Michel Guy and the Avignon Festival and had its first five performances there. It went on a wildly admired six-city European tour and washed ashore in America on Nov. 22 and 29 at a sold-out Metropolitan Opera House. This was hardly because the Met was foresighted enough to present it. It merely deigned to rent the house on two Sunday nights when it would otherwise have been dark. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Glass gained prestige (or notoriety) but lost a cataclysmic amount of money. Mr. Wilson went deep into debt, and Mr. Glass was back driving a cab soon after taking his curtain calls at the Met.*

So when I think of how the confluence of professionalism in the cultural sector and current economic conditions creates this siloed, careerist arts ecology, I also try to remember that there was a time when even Robert Wilson couldn't get presented in the U.S. and Philip Glass wrote a masterpiece but ended up back driving a cab. There are good things about professionalization but one wonders what it would be like if artists and producers spent less time in grad school studying theory and more time experimenting in the real world developing a practice while pushing their boundaries. Remember that Philip Glass was a co-founder with Lee Breuer of the theater company Mabou Mines; he was Richard Serra's studio assistant. So Glass knew all these worlds intimately and could engage with artists in other disciplines through a shared vocabulary.

This shared vocabulary did not seem evident in *Dog Days*. Like I said, I don't know enough about composition to critique the work of composers; of the various new operas I've attended, David T. Little's music is my favorite because of its complexity and diversity of styles and moods, his willingness to move between structured tonal "music" and noise, its variable levels and intricacy. But with *Dog Days* and other new operas (and multidisciplinary works generally) I have seen little indication that the overall presentational aesthetic of these productions rise to the level of formal innovation that the music seems to demand and even less that I would characterize as new. *Einstein* was truly new in 1976 and even now it challenges in its duration and perplexes in its opacity. But if you stick with it, you emerge transformed. I suspect, though, that Wilson, Glass and Childs were less interested in issues of style and being of-the-moment than fundamental questions about their respective forms. I suspect they were more interested in interrogation and disruption; in using the unique qualities of live performance to change people's perception of, and relationship to, time, space, sound and text.

Which leads me back to where I started with *Detroit*, *Habit* and the "Standard American Play" set in a suburban ranch house. It seems like a good moment to examine America's self-perception as presented in various artistic disciplines and how the presentational aesthetics of each adumbrate how we see ourselves and the assumptions we hold dear.

For more than fifty years this suburban vision has held our imagination. In the aftermath of WWII it was idealized and actively pursued. The GI Bill and postwar prosperity brought a wide swath of Americans firmly into the middle class and we sought to raise everyone up collectively. In the 60s, though wrought by turmoil, The Great Society tried to make that suburban dream – and all it entailed – attainable by as many Americans as possible. Even the Hippies' revolutionary rhetoric, their outward rejection of Establishment positions, was predicated on assumptions of material wellbeing. Social justice and liberation movements are not only about equality, freedom and civil rights, they are about access to economic security and wellbeing, values embodied by the Suburban Ranch House. The world we now inhabit – post-mortgage crisis, post-financial meltdown, post-Bush II – has been radically transformed. We live in an incredibly complicated moment where people still aspire to economic security and wellbeing as embodied by the Suburban Ranch House, yet reject the philosophies and mechanisms that make that possible. We are sold visions of American exceptionalism even as we sink ever lower amongst our

peers in the developed world in terms of infant mortality, life expectancy, education, social mobility and income inequality.

Detroit uses naturalistic style and the familiar forms of the "backyard play" to illustrate the precariousness of most people's social position; how easy it is to slip from middle class into poverty and how it is nearly impossible to climb back up. It portrays the alienation and unease lurking under the appearance of normalcy. But at the same time the form, style and ambiguously positive ending seem to step back from a rigorous interrogation of the actual state of affairs. D'Amour doesn't situate herself as a political playwright and it is not my intention to evaluate the play on that basis. Rather I'm suggesting that the mainstream American Theater, predicated as it is on the perpetuation of a "naturalistic" style of representation of "real life" is indulging the audience's fantasy of itself; reinforcing nostalgia for an imagined world that is rapidly fading into history and that renders the medium toothless.

Habit purposefully re-contextualizes the "Standard American Play" set in a suburban ranch house as Art Object. On one hand this is a brilliant destabilization of the assumptions of both traditional theater and the visual arts world. At the same time it is a troubling position to take insofar as the Standard American Play Set In A Suburban Ranch House also represents the hopes, dreams and fears of middle class Americans. One could posit that Levine has, accidentally or intentionally, put the American Dream in a vitrine, an art object to be bought and sold by speculators in the art market, which is not too far from the truth, as high end art buyers and the grandees of the financial services industry are often one and the same.

Dog Days, like *Detroit*, offers a more straightforward take on the genre. Though it is presented as an opera, from a narrative and textual basis it is not substantially different from any number of generic suburban dramas from the likes of John Patrick Shanley or David Auburn. The story of the opera – Lisa befriends a man who has chosen to live as a dog, retreating into his animal nature rather than face life in the post-apocalyptic landscape – is a dire fantasia, a nightmare version of the American Dream. Here, the safety net has been destroyed, America is in a constant state of war and the only reliable source of employment and food is the military. It's a dramatic dystopia to rival *The Walking Dead* and should be unsettling, but it just doesn't cohere. *Dog Days'* embrace of naturalism in text and as a performance style undercuts the scale of the music and the range of the performers; its dramaturgical instability blurs its focus and dulls its impact. It is, like *Detroit*, a shadow on the cave wall presented as the thing-in-itself.

As much as I love a good, dark dystopian song cycle or critical theatrical gaze into America's suburban underbelly, I don't think that dire representation is the only route to authenticity. In fact, of all the work I've seen recently, the one that most authentically represents this moment in American performance (IMHO) is also the one I found most fun and inspiring: Steven Reker and People Get Ready's *Specific Ocean* at NYLA.

Late September took me to Minneapolis for a dance platform. In case you didn't know, Minneapolis is America's Dance Utopia. The funding climate and arts ecology is so supportive that dancers and choreographers there can actually have kids, start families and sometimes buy houses. Sometimes they can even get enough support to not have another job. Or only one other job. Over the course of a week I think I saw every single dance company they had and saw every dancer/choreographer in at least three other people's work. It was fun and weird and quirky and exciting. They have a really good community there and a relatively diverse body of work. Also, the influx of New Yorkers has started to introduce a kind of rigor and investigative practice that is often absent in places that are less intense than NYC. Anyway, I was there with a mix of national and international presenters, most of whom have a Eurocentric or at least Globalist outlook.

And I'm watching great new work from Karen Sherman and Morgan Thorson, from Hijack, from these kids called Supergroup and I'm thinking about The Replacements, Husker Du, Soul Asylum and Trip Shakespeare, The Jayhawks, the Wallets and, of course, Prince. I started thinking about my days in Seattle, about DIY and punk rock and "alternative" culture and "just get in the van". I started thinking about Detroit, the city, home of Motown, the MC5 and Iggy & The Stooges, the White Stripes, even Eminem. And I started thinking that as sophisticated as I think I might get, I'm also just a kid from the suburbs of Baltimore who grew up on garage rock and 'zines and aimless car rides all night long; a child of trips to the inner city to see punk rock bands who traveled in vans across the country to play in abandoned lofts for other misfit kids, who crashed on couches and smoked cigarettes and drank beer in parking lots, who nurtured their discontent and inchoate dreams of revolution and change. And I'm thinking, see, *that's* America. Or at least, that's *my* America – and its

not the failure of the Suburban American Ranch House Dream, it's the promise of everything that is built both within it and as a reaction to it. In America artists work for a living, we do it in our garages, we do it low budget and we do it ourselves. And as much as we would like to get paid for it, as much as we would like respect for it, we do it no matter what it takes, because we're punk rock and we have dreams and we have energy and we're indomitable and maybe we're a little more earnest than we like to let on, maybe we're a little less ironically detached than our European friends because hey, underneath the irony is that slightly embarrassing but always burning flame of idealism. So we put songs by The Bangles and Kim Carnes in our shows with a nudge and a wink, but underneath we know it's because we actually *like* those songs, we do. And that is who we are – a mixed-up ball of hope and confusion, irony and earnestness, pluck and lethargy, a dream we still believe we can save from dying.

And it is in that spirit that I received *Specific Ocean*.

Steven Reker is a musician and dancer who makes very little distinction between his practices. The members of his band, People Get Ready (Luke Fasano, James Rickman and Jen Goma) serve as a dancer corps that he supplements as needed. For *Specific Ocean* he added the talents of dancers Natalie Kuhn, Caitlin Marz and Aaron Mattocks, who doubled as musicians. Reker describes People Get Ready's work as "multi-sensory mixtapes" and that is exactly how the show unfolds. The company is arrayed on either side of the stage where lie scattered guitars, keyboards, drums, microphones and other electronic instruments. Over the course of about 60 minutes they lay down sonic landscapes that reference everything from indie-pop confections to Spiritualized-style walls of sound. The performers regularly swap instruments and dance partners with the music and choreography perfectly intertwined – at once playful and rigorous, athletic and languorous, serious and silly.

Though the piece as a whole was immensely engaging and satisfying, three moments in particular stood out for me. First was what I call the Masonite Duet. The floor of NYLA's stage was covered in taped-together sheets of 4×8 Masonite and at one point Fasano and Reker rip up two panels and start dancing around with them. Anyone who has ever worked with Masonite knows it has a lot of give and sway, so when you flop it around it makes noise. It is heavy and unwieldy but the two of them flip, twist and toss the Masonite around with each other like playthings in a clever exploration of movement and sound. At times they lift the Masonite high above their heads only to drop them slowly but silently to the ground. It was surprisingly dramatic and athletic and sonically fascinating.

Second was Aaron Mattocks' Guitar Solo. He strapped on a prepared electric guitar like some kind of indie-rock icon, left it dangling from his back as he embarked on an athletic solo that made the guitar ring with feedback and squall. He ran up through the house at NYLA, around the audience and back onstage where he was joined by Caitlin Marz (I think) who doubled his choreography for a few minutes before receding offstage.

And finally, towards the end of the show there was a really fun, quirky music video of the band in silver space suits cavorting around Governors Island, Lower Manhattan and in somebody's apartment. For once video in a staged piece felt contextual, stylistically consistent and appropriate. The video looked really good but still homemade, the visual vocabulary riffed off of every goofy music video from the early 80's and yet felt totally current.

To conclude the show the group surrounded the drummer and gave us just a little taste of a kind of group drum percussion party before the stage went black.

To me this pitch-perfect blend of indie rock and choreography embodies the very best of American performance. *Specific Ocean* was truly multidisciplinary with everyone doing everything, embodying a kind of collective can-do spirit that is characteristic of every cool artistic indie scene from Chapel Hill to Portland to Minneapolis to Bushwick. It was smart but unpretentious, artful but not artificial – *Specific Ocean* is serious fun.

Also, it was, in some ways, completely non-representational. It was exactly what it was. Where *Dog Days* and *Detroit* were variations on the 'white suburban backyard' play and *Habit* was a commentary on the same, *Specific Ocean* was the show the kids made in the garage when Mom & Dad were inside watching TV; the show that you make with your friends after school or over the course of a long boring summer when you're broke and you use whatever you find lying around. *Specific Ocean* is the show that finds its inspiration in the magic and mystery of the everyday, points us to what is possible with an secondhand guitar, an old keyboard, Masonite, duct tape, good friends and a hell of a lot of imagination.

Remember that when you go to the polls on November 6.

And lose the name of Elsewhere in the Shooting Gallery at BAM's Fisher Space



and lose the name of action in rehearsal

I saw Miguel Gutierrez's new work *"And lose the name of action"* at its very first public performance at The Walker in Minneapolis on September 19th with an audience full of national and international presenters. We had already had two full days of back-to-back showcases and came to the Walker straight from a boozy happy hour reception across town. Exhausted and tipsy I was in no way prepared to offer the kind of attention that the piece demanded. In light of my shortcomings, I was determined to revisit the piece under more favorable circumstances and thus I made my way to BAM's Fisher Space on Saturday night to take another look and I'm glad I did.

I haven't seen all of Miguel's work, but of the pieces I have seen, *and lose the name of action* is not the strongest. It is, I think, the most ambitious and, as a colleague of mine proposed, a *transitional* work. Miguel is masterful at creating an artful mess. In his most recent solo work, HEAVENS WHAT HAVE I DONE, he revels in chaos interspersed with moments of startling clarity, precision and focus. HEAVENS, while meticulously messy, was comparatively lean and taut compared to the sprawl of *Last Meadow*. In *and lose the name of action* Gutierrez challenges himself to push further with the philosophical investigations he initiated in HEAVENS while embracing the sprawl and scope of *Last Meadow*.

Not only was I tired when I first saw the piece in Minneapolis, but Miguel's ever-morphing ensemble, The Powerful People, was performing the show in public for the first time. For this incarnation of The Powerful People Gutierrez has assembled a group of seriously talented stalwarts of all ages including Michelle Boulé, Hilary Clark, Luke George, K. J. Holmes, and Ishmael Houston-Jones, with sound design by Neal Medlyn, lighting by Lenore Doxsee, and visuals and writing by Boru O'Brien O'Connell. Not a slouch among them. But in Minneapolis the piece was still tentative and exploratory, still a bit wobbly. The performers knew their parts but didn't quite yet fully inhabit them, making it difficult to tell if it was my exhaustion or their opening night jitters that made the show feel labored. It was probably a combination of the two, to be honest, and upon returning to the piece this weekend it was stunning to see how much it had gelled. Each performer really seemed to have found their center both physically and psychologically, the performances seemed anchored and intentional and deeply, complicatedly intertwined.

The cast is an inherently diverse and complicated group of distinct individuals, but in the earlier version the levels of presence and presentation seemed off. Now, after some touring and practice, the levels adjusted really fluidly. It is difficult to articulate but the structure of the piece ebbs and flows like the changing tides and performers come into focus and recede, evanesce and vanish, make unexpected groupings and formations that lead to peculiar actions or dissipate entirely. Hilary Clark has this amazing moment where she's having a kind of fit, like she's touching a live wire, and the rest of the performers careen in to touch her and bounce off like chaotic neutrons. At another point they all run around the stage until it appears they are chasing Ishmael as he shouts "Fuck You!" as if on the run.

Those are only a few of many dynamic, energetic and curious moments *and lose the name of action* offers. The piece alternates improvisatory sequences with audience participation, performed text and filmed monologues that are vaguely philosophical and seemingly nonsensical, referencing Jorgen Leth's iconic 1967 experimental film *The Perfect Human*. From the title alone one can surmise that Gutierrez is aiming for

Big Ideas, endeavoring to make a grander gesture on a bigger stage. Given what he's aiming for and the odds of the whole thing collapsing under its own weight, he does an admirable job. The show has no lack of powerful moments and clever turnabouts and the tension between structured improvisation and actual structure is often effective. But over time, even upon revisiting the show a few months later, it still struggles a bit to sustain momentum. I found my attention wandering from time to time – not an uncommon occurrence, to be honest – and feeling like a bit of editing might have strengthened the overall effect of the evening.

The show also benefited from being in BAM's Fisher Space. When I saw it in Minneapolis it was performed on the stage in the McGuire Theater, a vast concert hall with high ceilings, a fly system and a steeply raked audience. The stage configuration of the show is meant to be intimate and immediate, clean and white like a gallery or a fashion runway or some kind of abstract conceptual white box space from the late sixties. In Minneapolis the vast empty house of seats loomed behind us and the ceiling towered above us beyond visibility, creating a strange sensation of being at the bottom of a vast cavern. In the Fisher the flexible space proved its worth by coddling the stage configuration perfectly. The performers were close enough to the audience for intimacy but far enough for comfort, the video screens were large enough to be easily legible and low enough to feel coherent with the rest of the set, and so on. Seeing the show in this context made me all the more glad I returned to see it again.

Miguel is one of those artists whose work bears repeated visits for any given single show and over time. He is constantly exploring, expanding, questioning and growing. *And lose the name of action* seems to signify a shift, maybe a bit of an abrupt and awkward growth spurt, that is at once daring, accomplished and flawed. One anticipates that Gutierrez is setting the stage for what comes next, that this experiment will mature into something remarkable and new. While I found it a bit challenging at times, the compelling parts of *and lose the name of action* far outweighed the misfires and by the end I was pretty much won over. Though I will say that I have a pet peeve about not giving performers a curtain call. I usually understand the artistic justification, but it always feels a little unsatisfying.

Speaking of unsatisfying, about a month after I first saw Miguel's piece in Minneapolis I visited the Fisher Space at BAM for the first time to see Maya Beiser's *Elsewhere*. I remember wondering what the big deal was about this new, flexible, multipurpose space that BAM had built, if this was the best they could do. *Elsewhere*'s approach to the space was as bland and generic as *and lose the name of action*'s was inventive and inspiring. *Elsewhere*, in fact, could have been staged anywhere.



Maya Beiser (photo by Merri Cyr)

At first I thought I would include it in my essay on *Dog Days* at Montclair, as *Elsewhere,* to my mind, suffers from many of the same mistakes. But it didn't quite fit in, and then as I honed in on what I wanted to address I decided to title the essay *Film Is Evil, Radio is Good* after Richard Foreman's play of the same name which Mel Gussow described as a "cryptographic mystery about the encroachment of visual imagery into the world of sound". Gussow's review continues, "Movies, we are told, steal one's image and warp one's brain. Radio, on the other hand, is pure. It stimulates rather than suppresses the imagination." (Side Note: I was first introduced to this work through a production directed by Dexter Bullard when we were both students at Northwestern.)

But time went by, I hadn't finished the essay and I went to see Bill Morrison's fantastic new project *The Shooting Gallery* also at BAM's new Fisher Space, and I realized that there was a richer, fuller, more thoughtful story to tell – one about the

thoughtful use of space, video and sound and the actual meaning of over-used terms like innovative and cutting-edge. *Elsewhere* and *The Shooting Gallery* each used video and music, both occurred in the same space, but their effects and implications couldn't be more different.

Elsewhere billed itself as a CelloOpera and is, ostensibly, a "piece about the voice of women bearing witness." Beiser commissioned new work from composers Eve Beglarian, Missy Mazzoli and Michael Gordon and then created the performance with director Robert Woodruff and a bevy of collaborators. The presentation was an overwhelmingly multimedia experience with Beiser performing in a box constructed of thick plastic wrap, seated on one bed among four that suggested alternately a detention center, a concentration camp, a prison, an insane asylum and a barracks. Onto this plastic wrap surface were projected a video consisting of a series of literal images – pictures of dictators, war-torn landscapes – and occasionally Beiser's face with a kind of slightly-off-time jittery quality to match her distorted voice. Beiser, clad in a gauzy white nightdress, curly titian hair all a-tumble, was joined onstage by a chorus of three dancers in trench coats and Trilbys that were subsequently shed to reveal form-fitting white button-down shirts and vinyl miniskirts. These women lay down on the cots, stretched, undulated and exited, returning later with wet tresses that they whipped against the plastic.

Now I have nothing at all against beautiful, lithe, athletic young women dancing sensually onstage, taking off their overcoats to reveal skimpy outfits or whipping their wet hair around like Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*. It's just that I don't really see how this fits with the expressed theme of the work. The choreographer, Brook Notary, is an interesting choice for a "piece about the voice of women bearing witness" and "The suffering of girls and women, often voiceless, abused, raped and sometimes stoned to death." Notary's bio states that she is a "highly sought-after choreographer and advisor for the US Pole Dance Federation" who has "worked with some of the leading pole dancers in the nation."

Between the athletic pole dance-influenced choreography and the ubiquitous, overwhelming and persistently literal video, I found it difficult to reconcile what I was seeing with what I was told the piece was about and what I was hearing. Because what I was hearing was brilliant. Beiser is a stunningly gifted musician and Beglarian, Mazzoli and Gordon gave her great material to work with, not to mention when she was joined by the consistently astonishing Helga Davis.

I found myself trying to block out all the distractions of video, choreography, lighting and set and just focus on the music. Beiser is ferocious and riveting. Her face, her hands, her entire self seem to meld with her instrument as she wrests sound from it. She is aggressive and passionate and startlingly inventive, whether she is playing a standard wooden cello or a souped-up electric one. From yearning middle eastern-infused melodies to industrial strength distortion and noise, Beiser brought muscular life to each composer's score. Beiser, in and of herself, is dramatic enough.

My father is a doctor but he's played violin all his life. When I was very young he was in a string quartet with three other doctors and I still remember curling up on the sofa in our living room listening to them play, closing my eyes to imagine what the sounds looked like, eventually falling asleep. My father's love of music meant regular trips to the Baltimore Symphony to Shriver Hall at Johns Hopkins and other classical music venues. It was always fascinating and exciting – watching the conductor, watching the musicians signal to each other or just focus on their part, looking at the funny faces soloists would make when they really got into it, or just closing my eyes and letting my mind wander in the sound, imagining all kinds of things both real and fantastic.

As I left BAM's Fisher Theater I reflected on what I had just seen and what I just heard, the disconnect between them and my youthful memories of music before video and it hit me – *Elswhere*, *Dog Days* and all these productions with ubiquitous video and tech – whether in dance, theater or music, embody the profound self-deception that characterizes our moment.

Just as "naturalism" in theater is a style used to represent a certain psychological understanding of reality, so too is the current multimedia aesthetic. But it is a shallow style, a surface style that draws its inspiration merely from film and television: music videos, reality shows and 24-hour news channels. There is a difference between visual design and video design. A scenographer who is also a visual designer will engage with lighting, sets, costumes and all the various elements that make up the visual presentation of a staged work. The visual composition and its relation to the text, to bodies in space, to narrative – however disjointed – must cohere and, as performance is meant to be live, should support, contextualize and reinforce

liveness. Video is by definition too literal, too oppressive, too dictatorial. It undermines the agency of the audience by attaching images to the abstract. Video is not a substitute for liveness, presence or actual design; it is insufficient for the thoughtful cultivation of mystery and ephemerality.

When we use video to recreate the visual aesthetics of mass media onstage, whether we think we are interrogating them or not, we are perpetuating the culture of misrepresentation that mass media fosters. We think that by calling it art we are safe in our simulacrum of interrogation when in fact we are complicit, we reveal our own passivity and acceptance of the dominant narrative. Before MTV existed rock stars could be ugly, they just had to be good. What do we lose when we demand that everything be "visual"? It is easy to mistake the image for the thing-in-itself, it is easy to lose your way, to mistake media for meaning.

To me music, like dance, is most powerful when it is mysterious, when it opens up our imaginations and brings us into new worlds, when it leaves questions unanswered.

Just last week I went to the Miller Theater to hear a composer's portrait of Olga Neuwirth performed by the International Contemporary Ensemble. The concert consisted of two pieces, the first a piano concerto titled "locus… doublure… solus" from 2001 and the second the U.S. premiere of an ambitious hour-long orchestral work entitled "…ce qui arrive…" Written for two instrumental groups, samples, and live electronic, there was no video, no visual design, no multimedia gussied up showmanship whatsoever, just an extraordinarily gifted group of musicians, a skillfully designed sound system with strategic speaker placement, and an incredible score. It was startlingly beautiful, transfixing and transporting. From the program notes by musicologist Paul Griffiths:

> *What happens, is. In 2002, Paul Virilio had the opportunity to expand his work as a cultural theorist into the forum of an exhibition, on the theme of accidents, under the title "ce qui arrive" (what happens). Neuwirth took the same phrase to label what developed as one of her longest and most powerful concert works, in which accidents and collisions are subsumed in music that generally moves slowly, oozing forward, and that takes place as if in a large resonant container, partly thanks to the electronic presence, on which Neuwirth worked at the Institute for Electronic Music and Acoustics in Graz, partly thanks to the harmonic spectra on D — spectra often including quarter-tones — that bulge and stay and move throughout the composition. Perhaps this echoing music is the sound of memory, revolving on events — life experiences as recorded by Paul Auster, reading from his Hand to Mouth and The Red Notebook, as well as musical events and references (folk song, popular song, chorale). Or perhaps we could imagine the work's components — instrumental and electronic music, spoken monologue, intermittent songs — as remnants of a shipwreck, reverberating underwater.*

The key phrase above being, "perhaps we could imagine…" Yes, let us imagine, let us resist the dictatorship of literal imagery and representation, let us dare to see something greater, to seek and be moved by the invisible, to cultivate insight.

Here's a preview video of the concert, after the fact:



That being said, if we are to imagine a new way of interacting with sound and the moving image, you could do worse than Bill Morrison's *The Shooting Gallery*. Morrison is a filmmaker and as such seems to be more thoughtful about the meaning of images, the nature of representation and the

various qualities of visual media. Upon entering The Fisher Space – almost completely devoid of seating and wide open, screens hung around the room – one was handed a laser pointer which was used to trigger short video and audio clips. Part of the fun was wandering around interacting with other people, trying to figure out how it worked and which images when triggered created which sounds. Morrison used video snippets from old nitrate masters interpolating them with original footage, distorting and contorting the footage through lens and color saturation.



The Shooting Gallery – A film and music installation by Bill Morrison and Richard Einhorn (photo by Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times)

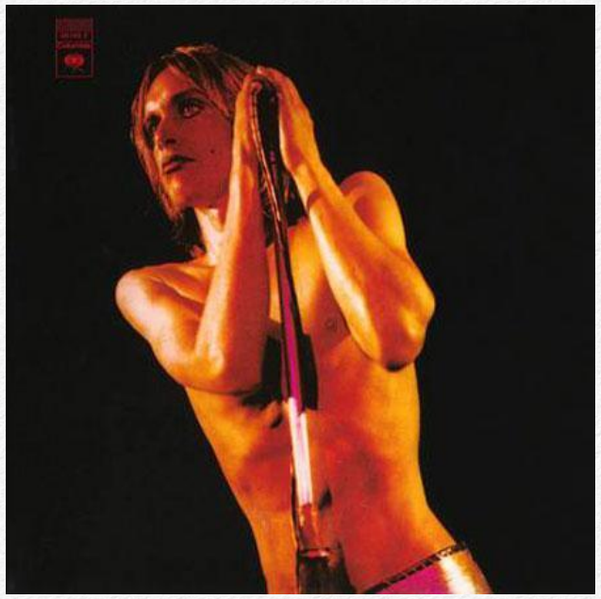
The snippets, projected in arrays of circles, responded to laser triggers by activating music and audio composed and produced by Richard Einhorn.

Not only did Morrison and Einhorn actually use the Fisher Space in an entirely unexpected way, the work seemed to posit a truly interactive, multimedia immersive "theater" of the future. On the BAM webpage for The Shooting Gallery Morrison says that "The fourth wall is a synapse in the creation of a shared experience," and that the most satisfying thing about people shooting at his films with lasers is "Creating something like a group gestalt." While Morrison is not the first, or only, filmmaker working with these ideas of shared experience and interactivity, he is certainly moving in an interesting direction. He is operating beyond literalism and his depth of knowledge of film suggests a kind of dramaturgical rigor in the selection of source material, a clear set of aesthetic criteria for creating collages of imagery and sound.

Of course NONE of this project would have been possible without Jim Findlay (who also did video for *Dog Days* and tons of other projects, which raises an interesting question about how artists collaborate, how their work is contextualized and how resources are allocated during project development to support – or not support – the various creative elements proportionately) and programming by Ryan Holsopple who has (had?) a company called 31Down that consistently makes kick-ass multimedia work on a shoestring budget.

We hope BAM continues to bring artists like Morrison and Gutierrez into the Fisher and that they'll keep mixing it up. We're looking forward to Pan Pan's *All That Fall* in a week or so…and who knows what the future might bring? More mystery, more unknown, more undefinable new work, please!?

This is America, Now (A Frame for APAP)



Dear European Friends in town for Under The Radar, Coil and American Realness, (are audiences who don't live in our little contemporary performing arts world all the time), may I have your attention!? I just want to say: this is America, now. Debate Society, Pig Iron, Stephen Reker & People Get Ready, Kyle Abraham, Rashaun Mitchell, Radiohole, Half Straddle, Emily Johnson, Kristen Kosmas, Peggy Shaw and pretty much everything at American Realness – Keith Hennessy, Miguel Gutierrez, AUNTS – this is who we are and is the heart of who we have always been.

I could go on and on naming artists but as you move through NYC this winter try not to just be "shopping" – try and really look closer. Instead of trying to look at this work "objectively" – try and step back and see the big picture: who we are, how we are, what we are and how our work reflects the conditions under which it is made. Judson is dead! Long Live Judson! Can we stop talking about Judson? In America now, like in Judson's America then, artists have to step outside, have got to tear down calcified structures and re-imagine our art for this moment. And we're doing it without money, resources or support. We're DIY, we're seat of our pants, we're struggling to say something true under tough conditions. It may not look like it from the outside, but let's face it: America hasn't been post-WWII America since, like, 1975.

Now, maybe Michael Kaiser and all the other swells who were uptown at the Hilton, networking in the halls and buying and selling and talking bullshit, trying to hawk their outdated, out-of-touch, unsustainable vision of American Arts will try and convince you differently, but they all have good reasons to lie. Their livelihood depends on keeping things as they are, on keeping the masses at bay, and even if one generously assumes that they have good intentions, like most wealthy people, they are completely out of touch with actual real life on the ground for most people. This is America now, hit hard by recession, struggling to make ends meet, in the grip of a culture war where a small percentage of reactionaries hold the rest of the country hostage, where hope and change turns into "well at least it isn't worse."

Artistically, contemporary work is so unfamiliar to most audiences that even the "paper of record", the New York Times, is challenged to find writers who seem to be interested enough in the work to learn how to look at it, talk about it and maybe even care about it. They have some stringers who get it, but not enough.

Ben Brantley substitutes pithy dismissal for actual analysis in his 99% substance-free "review" of Radiohole. Never once does he ask WHY the work looks like it does, or what Radiohole references within the work (has he ever even heard of Iggy & The Stooges much less asked why Radiohole would sample the riff from "I Wanna Be Your Dog"?), or how the text operates in a non-narrative, oblique, way. He would rather toss off an essentially meaningless term of dismissal like "bougie-boho" than actually engage with what the work is doing. He doesn't know how to look at this work and even less idea how to talk about it – so how can he share that with his readers?

I don't blame him, he's doing his best, he's a nice guy and he knows his readership, he is *of* his readership, and his writing reflects their world view – they may be New Yorkers but sometimes they might as well be from suburban Des Moines, just as provincial but on a larger stage.

Alastair Macaulay will inevitably spend more time talking about the dancers' bodies than the ideas in the work or why/how/what it is meant to do, how it inhabits, reflects and resonates in this moment with the world around us. Once again, no blame, his

passion is toe shoes and tutus, the pas de deux and perfectly elongated torso, no squat and misshapen Wendy Whelan for him, no men over 30 with jiggly thighs, no dancer that dares to show the work of dancing. Alastair tries and sometimes even hits it, but this work is out of his comfort zone and his job, like Brantley's, is to guard the consumer from fraudulently advertised entertainment, something that purports to be fun, but isn't worth the price of a ticket.

Our community has been reaching out to the Times for dialogue for ages, asking them to try and get outside the existing categories, try and match writers more thoughtfully with their strengths and interests, open up a conversation rather than keep butting heads, but they don't seem able or interested in having a conversation.

Imagine if the cultural capital of your country couldn't rouse a critic to do some research and give thought to the work he or she is seeing? You can't imagine that, can you? Welcome to America.

This is us, now. This is America. Not Hollywood, not Silicon Valley, not the glittering skyline of Manhattan that looks to all the world such a fabulous playground. We are American artists: we have no health care. We're buried in student debt because, unlike Europe, our university education isn't free or even subsidized. America has less class mobility and more income inequality than since anyone currently alive can remember. And our work shows that. We are still fumbling our way towards a new system, building it alone – with no support from funders or our elders.

"Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." Walt Whitman

Do you know Whitman? Do you know where we come from, how our dreams are formed? We are not Baudrillard, commenting from afar, we are in the mix, we are the real and the simulacrum, we're so fake we're real we're so real we're unbelievable.

We're not theorists, we do first, theorize later. We're profoundly materialistic and strangely spiritual. We're a mass of contradictions, complex and constantly shifting, always in the process of defining and redefining who we are, since we were birthed from the fever dreams of the Enlightenment. We came into existence with only a tenuous relationship between the actual and the envisioned and have been battling over it ever since.

Next time, don't just come to NYC, come to Fusebox in Austin or TBA in Portland or Live Arts in Philly – but really if you really really want to know who we are, rent a car and drive across country. Go hang out in a mall in Ohio. Park in a 7-11 parking lot and smoke cigarettes, drink a Slurpee, and imagine yourself imagining the life you will lead when you finally get the fuck out of wherever the fuck you are.

There's a frame here, a context. Look around you and realize that change is happening here, just like over there, we're all broke, we're all fucked and we've all got to get over it and get it together to move forward together if we believe in even remotely close to the same things. The funny thing is, to be honest, as much as we complain, it is when we're broke, hungry and ambitious that we're at our best – cultural revolutions, changing of the guard, DIY and down low, making grassroots change and pushing up. Okay, okay, I'm a child of the late 80s and early 90s, my formative years were mixed tapes and 'zines and SASEs and Sub Pop and Nirvana (fuck Pearl Jam, *poseurs*). But the beauty of destruction is the possibility of creation.

So as you arrive or as you move on look at or look back at this work in that context, like Julie Potter says in her essay "Good Circulation: Grassroots Exchange, Connecting Communities of Practice", "The DIY efforts feel distinctly American, emerging from ingenuity, self reliance and a driven work ethic."

I share again what I first wrote in "Detroit And Other Apocalypses" and referenced again in my end-of-year collection of orphaned ideas:

> *I started thinking about my days in Seattle, about DIY and punk rock and "alternative" culture and "just get in the van". I started thinking about Detroit, the city, home of Motown, the MC5 and Iggy & The Stooges, the White Stripes, even Eminem. And I started thinking that as sophisticated as I think I might get, I'm also just a kid from the suburbs of Baltimore who grew up on garage rock and 'zines and aimless car rides all night long; a child of trips to the inner city to see punk rock bands who traveled in vans across the country to play in abandoned lofts for other misfit kids, who crashed on couches and smoked cigarettes and drank beer*

in parking lots, who nurtured their discontent and inchoate dreams of revolution and change. And I'm thinking, see, that's America. Or at least, that's my America – and its not the failure of the Suburban American Ranch House Dream, it's the promise of everything that is built both within it and in reaction to it. In America artists work for a living, we do it in our garages, we do it low budget and we do it ourselves. And as much as we would like to get paid for it, as much as we would like respect for it, we do it no matter what it takes, because we're punk rock and we have dreams and we have energy and we're indomitable and maybe we're a little more earnest than we like to let on, maybe we're a little less ironically detached than our European friends because hey, underneath the irony is that slightly embarrassing but always burning flame of idealism. So we put songs by The Bangles and Kim Carnes in our shows with a nudge and a wink, but underneath we know its because we actually like those songs, we do. And that is who we are – a mixed-up ball of hope and confusion, irony and earnestness, pluck and lethargy, a dream we still believe we can save from dying.

This is America, now: see it for what it is, beautiful, flawed and broken, always on the path towards perfectibility and always falling short. It's the 21st Century – can we conduct ourselves according to the standards we demand of our art? Can we strip ourselves of our biases and preconceptions, can we interrogate our assumptions and investigate the big questions, can we operate in the world the way we want our art to? Can we start to come together as if it was all in ruins and we had to remake the world again, but this time the way we want it to be, not just the way we've been told it is?

This is America, and We Jam Econo. Happy APAP.

Whites Only (or, WTF is the deal with diversity in the performing arts?)



Apparently there's been some kind of heated conversation going on in the punditsphere about diversity in the arts. A post on ArtsJournal by Doug Borwick called "Considering Whiteness" seems to be latest iteration. Frankly, I'm not sure how much merit there is in examining "whiteness" at all – it seems like a kind of privileged posture. But I haven't had time to catch up on all the backstory so I could be wrong. That being said, as Black History Month draws to a close, I'd like to toss out a few thoughts that have been kicking around the Culturebot offices for awhile in anticipation of a longer, more thoughtful and fully investigated series of articles on this issue, funded by The Ford Foundation. (Just kidding about the Ford Foundation, it's really Surdna.) (Just kidding, we're not getting funded by Surdna or anybody else. But we'd take the money if someone offered.)

Culturebot's little "downtown" contemporary experimental theater world frequently laments its whiteness and a lot of the causes seem obvious – privileged access to elite educational institutions, easier access to capital through those networks of privilege, a sense of security by virtue of whiteness to spend 10 years not making money with the expectation that eventually you will. The cultural conditions and contexts of most "downtown" artists seem to predispose the sector towards a "white bias". But while that may be true in part, it is hardly the whole story, and hardly an excuse.

A few months ago I went to what was probably one of the worst plays I've ever attended in my life, certainly the worst I've ever seen by a so-called professional theater. Not only was the show poorly written, directed and performed but it was spectacularly homophobic, sexist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic and racist. It also happened to be commissioned and produced by one of the first theaters devoted entirely to the development and presentation of work by African-American theater artists and artists of color. The company has been around for 40 years or so and continues to produce new work, if sporadically, despite a dwindling audience base and increasingly outdated politics and aesthetics. Fascinating anthropology, terrible art. From what I hear, this organization is repeatedly denied funding – the company thinks it is due to racism, everyone else says (in private) that it is because the work is consistently subpar. But then the question arises about cultural bias – are funders holding them to a Eurocentric aesthetic standard without being sensitive to the cultural context? Or is that just white guilt talking? This is complicated and controversial stuff.

This got me wondering about how many black theaters are there nationally anyway? I started asking around and found out, anecdotally, there aren't many – and that culturally-specific African-American theaters are in perpetual crisis. Frankly, until I got an email for DETROIT '67 at The Public I couldn't tell if Classical Theatre of Harlem and the National Black Theatre were still producing at all. From what I understand St. Paul, Minnesota's Penumbra Theatre has gone bankrupt several times, requiring major bailouts from funders just to stay in existence. What's the deal? Culturally specific Asian-American, Hispanic-American and Other-American theaters thrive (relatively speaking) while Af-Am theaters languish. Is it because integration and race-blind casting have come so far in mainstream theater that there is no longer a perceived need for culturally specific Af-Am theaters? I highly doubt it. Is it because the African-American community doesn't have a wide enough donor base or a history of arts philanthropy to provide access to resources? I don't know and unfortunately I don't know of anyone looking into it.

During Culturebot's Long Table on The Politics of Cultural Production at the Under The Radar Festival, Clyde Valentin from the Hip-Hop Theater Festival made some really astute and challenging observations. In a discussion of process-based approaches to making theater he noted that artists working in the hip-hop vernacular are often very product oriented, that's the culture. It is about making the song, the dance, the show and getting out there and, frankly, getting paid.

Just a few days ago Jason Zinoman wrote an article in the NY TIMES about how Upright Citizen's Brigade has managed to grow so much partly because it doesn't pay performers. One of the founders, Matt Besser, expressed surprise to discover that performers of color, more so perhaps than white performers, are unwilling to work for free:

> *One of the reasons you don't see legions of black performers there," Cyrus McQueen, an African-American improviser who studied at Upright Citizens Brigade, wrote in an e-mail, "is because I don't know many minorities willing or able to work for nothing to get stage time.*

Mr. Besser sounded surprised about this point. "I never thought of it that way," he said, though he conceded, "It's true there are more African-American stand-ups." But he argued that the Upright Citizens' model ultimately lifts everyone.

"We pay our performers," he said, "just not with money."

Besser is referring to a kind of soft capital associated with prestige value rather than actual money. But for people who come from cultural contexts where actual money is hard to come by, that argument sounds pretty weak. Ultimately though, this is about class more than race, but in this case, race and class are so intertwined as to be almost inextricable.

Later on in the Long Table, during a conversation on the ideal conditions for collaboration, some artists talked about the need for trust. Clyde pointed out that with his artists the idea of walking into a room with someone they don't know, without a determined outcome, can be unfamiliar and off-putting in and of itself. But the kind of trust that is implicit and assumed in that situation by artists with shared experiences of privilege is very likely unfamiliar to many hip-hop artists and can, in fact, be threatening. Artists from disadvantaged backgrounds or working in the hip-hop idiom may, in all likelihood, be coming from a place (both geographically, socially and psychologically) where blind trust is not an asset but a weakness. Unlearning that wariness is not only a significant undertaking but also demands a fundamental, ongoing change in their circumstances. Either that or they somehow must balance being trusting in the creative process with wariness in more hostile environs.

Clyde's insights put a spotlight on significant and frequently unacknowledged differences in the culture and conditions in which art is made and how that affects process, form and valuation. Returning then to the question about cultural bias – are curators, funders and institutions holding Af-Am artists and arts organizations to a Eurocentric aesthetic standard without being sensitive to the cultural context? Is the white-dominated arts infrastructure being sensitive to these issues and addressing the underlying economic and social conditions that influence cultural production? Alternately, does "white guilt" play an insidious role in funding that leads to (I hate to use this phrase, given its origin, but…) the soft bigotry of low expectations?

For instance, everyone knows that NPN is pretty clearly divided between the bigger budget arts organizations focusing on contemporary work (and curated predominantly by straight middle aged white men) and more diverse, frequently lower-budget, institutions. The "of-privilege" institutions sit in an Art Burst showcase thinking, "Do I really have to sit through another autobiographical identity politics solo show telling me things about poverty and racism that everyone in this room already agrees with and is working to solve?" while the more diverse organizations see the funding that goes to European and contemporary work and feel alienated by what appears to an unfair elitist, Eurocentric bias on the part of funders and institutions. "Why," they ask "do these people insist on funding work that doesn't speak to anybody else but themselves, certainly not me or my experience!?" And so everyone gets together and, with the best of intentions, sweeps the conflict under the rug. Year after year no-one seems to be able to have this conversation in public, no-one will initiate a real, if difficult, dialogue, and the situation continues to deteriorate. It's a kind of war of attrition by well-meaning people with shared values and an overbearing fear of hurting people's feelings by speaking truthfully.

At the same time that no-one will initiate actual dialogue among diverse arts organizations, "of-privilege" institutions worry about building a diverse audience base as part of their audience development and engagement strategies. All too often they implement initiatives that, more than anything, serve to reveal their cluelessness. They promote as "diverse"only the culturally specific work they feel comfortable with and fits their aesthetic presuppositions. They do "Spanish" or "Asian" or "African-American" adaptations of Western classics or poetry slams or other misguided, outdated endeavors without taking any time to look in the mirror. Regional theaters present August Wilson plays regularly as a gesture. I've been told that there are directors on the regional theater circuit who are considered August Wilson "experts" and whenever a theater wants to do one of his plays, they get hired. But let's face it, August Wilson is basically Ibsen with Negroes instead of Norwegians, and these directors could just as well direct anything else in the canon. Do they get hired to do that? Or are they only deemed good enough for directing Wilson?

In my recent essay on The Politics of Cultural Production in Theater I briefly address the negative impacts of the over-professionalization of the field. As prohibitively expensive advanced degrees become increasingly *de rigueur,* the barriers to entry increase for a career in the arts or for access to institutional support as an artist. An unacknowledged class – and thus race – bias exists. I've never seen the statistics but I'd wager that minority representation in the philanthropic sector is also greatly lacking. If you work in a "white" organization whose funders are primarily "white" the odds of achieving any kind of actual diversity or authentically engaging diverse audiences dwindle proportionately. If you want diverse audiences engaging with your institution you need to be a diverse institution – and that means in leadership positions, not just admin and support. The sector is economically predisposing itself towards whiteness and then lamenting a lack of diversity.

It doesn't have to be this way. Even in Culturebot's little "contemporary" corner of the world there are artists who make a concerted effort to foster diversity in their work and in their audiences. You only have to look at artists like the visionary Ralph Lemon, Theaster Gates, Kalup Linzy and a host of other groundbreaking artists to see that cutting edge work is coming from an Af-Am perspective. Though it is worth noting this innovation is mostly positioned in visual art and dance, not theater. Non Af-Am artists are making efforts at diversity. From as far back as *PULLMAN, WA* Young Jean Lee has actively cultivated diverse representations in her work. *The Shipment*, *Lear* and *Untitled Feminist Show* all demonstrate simultaneous rigorous commitments to both diverse representation and contemporary aesthetic practice. Many of Richard Maxwell's plays use truly race-blind casting and Alec Duffy's ever-changing Hoi Polloi ensemble is intentionally comprised of a diverse group of artists, both "white" and "of color", all of whom share a similar aesthetic outlook and artistic rigor.

Which is to say that contemporary performance and diversity are not mutually exclusive. There are people "of color" who are interested and well-versed in its ideas and practices and it is really a matter of all artists from all backgrounds working harder to reach beyond their immediate circles to find a wider group of collaborators from different backgrounds. Some institutions, like The Public, work really hard at it and do a great job, others are sorely behind in their efforts. But, going back to my theme of artists taking responsibility for their work – we can't wait for institutions to create change, we have to make it happen on the ground, in our practice, right now, and model the world we want to inhabit. The shifting demographics in the U.S. suggest that this is going to happen anyway, so unless theater wants to become completely irrelevant, it better get with the program.

It is interesting that this representation problem seems to be much more a problem in theater than dance. The ranks of talented, successful and critically acclaimed choreographers includes numerous African-Americans from Alvin Ailey to Bill T. Jones to Kyle Abraham, Rashaun Mitchell and Trajal Harrell, to name a few. And the ranks of Af-Am women in dance is also notable, as evidenced by 651 Arts' presentation of "FLY: Five First Ladies of Dance" and a number of younger choreographer such as Camille A. Brown. In this scenario, as my colleague Jeremy has pointed out, it is interesting to note that the most glaringly absent voice is that of the straight Af-Am male.

Semiotically and culturally, Af-Am women and gay men don't represent a fearsome threat to white male power. Straight Af-Am men do. They represent not only a threat to power, but, they symbolize work and labor. The rebellious slave of *Django* can be read both in racial terms and as representation of of slave rebellion as gory, retributive class war. Following this thinking I would contend that cultural bias in aesthetic valuation is as much about class as race. Justin E.H. Smith just wrote a great essay in the NY TIMES called "The Enlightenment's 'Race' Problem, and

Ours", making an eloquent case for race as we know it being a relatively recent construct, one meant to defend slavery and enforce a complex system of oppression. He says:

> *It is American culture that is principally responsible for the perpetuation of the concept of race well after its loss of scientific respectability by the mid-20th century. Even the most well-meaning attempts to grapple with the persistence of inequality between "blacks" and "whites" in American society take it for granted at the outset that racial categories adequately capture the relevant differences under investigation (see, for example: Thomas B. Edsall's recent column, "The Persistence of Racial Resentment") . This may have something to do with the fact that the two broad cultural-historical groupings of people in this country, which we call "white" and "black" and which have been constituted through the complicated histories of slavery, immigration, assimilation, and exclusion, tend at their extremes to correlate with noticeably different phenotypic traits.*

So when we talk about cultural bias in aesthetic valuation we're really talking about how much a given artist has access to the education, training, cultural knowledge, means of production and social networks necessary to create work "equivalent" to artists from privilege. In America that tends to break down along racial lines but the truth is that ginning up racial conflict is part and parcel of obscuring vast economic disparities. It is easier to "see" race than class or economic status, it is easier to identify along a spectrum of sameness and difference based on appearance, especially in an aspirational society where one day you might be rich too.

So if we truly want cultural diversity in the performing arts in America, if we want an arts ecology that reflects the heterogeneity of our society, then we have to look at the economic realities of the arts, how economics dictates the means of production and presentation, how it affects arts access for artists, audiences and administrators. This is live performing arts, not film; by definition it is a two-way transaction. Audience development strategies are insufficient at best. We're going to have to look long and hard at which artists and institutions we support, how we support them and what we really want to achieve with that support. We need to have frank conversations about quality and expectations, about funding and support not just for institutions but for artists themselves. We're going to look at how to get the arts out of the institutions and into communities in substantial, meaningful ways. We're going to have to commit to educating today's and tomorrow's audiences and artists. And we're going to have to buck up for the difficult, sophisticated conversations about the multiple publics we serve, apprise the assimilable and the unassimilable differences of cultures in juxtaposition, interrogate the dubious notion of "universality" and be willing to confront our own biases and prejudices so we can change.

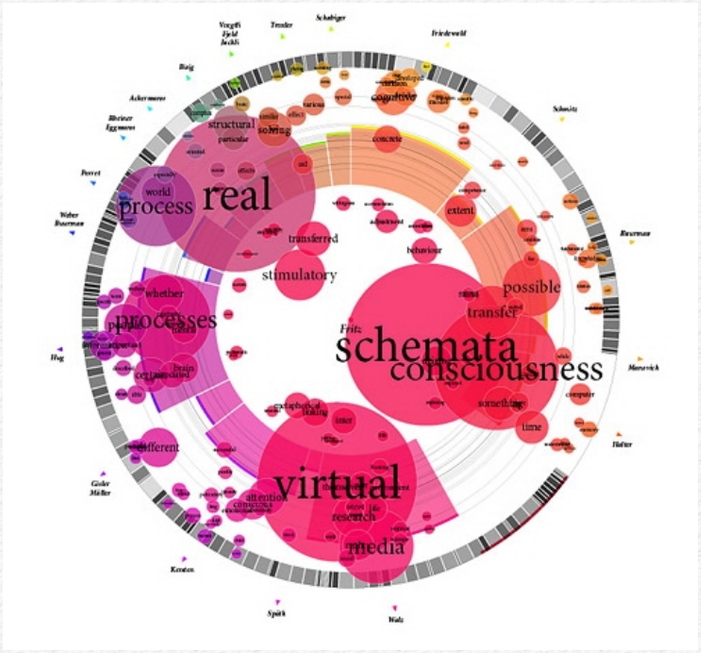
It's a heavy lift but we can either do it ourselves or let the tides of history do it for us. You decide.

Live Art in the Digital Age

4

Thinking Digitally: How The Social Web Is Changing Arts, Culture, Politics & Economics // Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (and Distribution) // The Future of Performance: A Performance, Lecture

Thinking Digitally: How The Social Web Is Changing Arts, Culture, Politics & Economics



Data Visualization graphic from The Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI)

When I posted my "Year End Orphans" article in December 2012, one of the questions I asked was, "Does the rise of a technocratic class point to a possible third way, a new era in imagining America? Can we move the ever-evolving dream of America fully into the information age? Can we change the conversation from a binary and inherently regressive framework to one that is multipoint, nuanced and future-facing?" Who knew that in less than three months this would become a hot topic? A recent article on Wired.com noted a proliferation of socialist memes at a recent TED Conference and a recent report on WNYC's Morning Edition talked about the increasing influence of NYC's tech sector on the upcoming mayoral race.

When I ran for Mayor as a performance project back in 2005, part of my platform (as founder and sole member of The Blog Party) was free, citywide, public wifi and in-home broadband Internet as a public utility like water, gas, etc. Neither of those things has happened yet. But I also promised more transparency, accountability and access by increasing mayoral use of the Internet as a communications platform, open data sharing including budget numbers and insight into the workings of government. To give credit where credit is due, between 311, the highly functional and easy-to-use NYC.gov, the NYC Open Data site, My Money NYC and Chief Digital Officer Rachel Sterne Haot's twitter feed, Michael Bloomberg has done a hell of a job as the city's first 21st Century Mayor.

In 2005 social media as we know it had really just started to emerge. Friendster had been around a few years but hadn't gotten much traction, MySpace was starting to make noise and Facebook was still only for college kids, I think. But blogging and the democratization of content creation was already pointing the way to the profound cultural changes that social networking would bring. In 2013 the convergence of the explosive growth in social media with the proliferation of mobile platform combined with the increased processor speed allowing us to analyze big data have altered our behavior patterns and interactions, our very perceptions of how we move through the world on a daily basis. This new, hyper-networked world is changing our understanding of time, space, attention and relationships; we are renegotiating the meaning of "public" and moving ever forward to increasing complexity.

As we more fully integrate the behavioral and cognitive patterns of the social web into our daily lives, it is not surprising that we see people revisiting socialist ideas. This is not from a historic ideological perspective so much as an intuitive leap to alternative frameworks for envisioning social organization in a networked world. From Napster to YouTube to Facebook to Twitter, Foursquare, Instagram, Vine and whatever this week's hot new app is, the mobile, social web has made available to the masses the means of production and distribution for creative products and ideas. Decentralized distributive networks are the norm, not the exception. And the "flat" world, or more accurately the world as we experience it through the horizontal platform of the mobile, social web, lends itself to socialist language. We "share" items all the time, we crowdsource funding, we do our jobs in virtual collaborative workspaces, even tech terms like "distributive" echo old socialist terms like "redistribution". So is it possible to redeem the good ideas of socialism from its tarnished bloody history in the 20th Century? I think so. And it is the tech sector that can do it.

Innovative thinkers in the tech sector have an incentive to be platform-agnostic in their engagement with government and politics by looking at current structures through the lens of systems analysis: what is government meant to do, does it do it well and can we improve it through innovation? How do politics support or impede government? The tech sector consists, generally, of ardent capitalists, frequently of a libertarian bent. Is there an opportunity here to reframe the conversation on government in an integrative rather than oppositional way, where the nexus of socialism, capitalism, libertarianism and technology creates a viable model for 21st Century democracy? If you step back and look at it, it is absurd that we are still using a government structure that was first designed in the 1770s. The American Experiment as I understand it was about enacting and refining the ideas of The Age of Enlightenment, which seem to have held up pretty well, all things considered. But the actual framework of the government currently in use was designed prior to The Industrial Revolution! That's insane. To continue the tech metaphor, we have to redesign the operating system of American Government for the 21st Century. Wouldn't that be a fun project?!

Unfortunately the national conversation has devolved to the point where the very mention of the word "socialist" will get you branded as a loony, left wing freak and the term "capitalism" implies an evil rapacious, heartless corporate titan savaging the 99% at every turn. The Right has staked out a position where all government is bad and has embarked on a campaign to destroy it. The Left has been unable to articulate a new vision of government, unwisely retaining the language of Big Government that is loathed by many voters. We're at an impasse. How is it even possible that in the 21st Century we are still dealing with such a fantastically simplistic and unproductive linear "left/right", "black and white" approach to solving the most complicated issues of our times and possibly in human history? When we step back and look at it objectively, Democrats and Republicans actually share many values and ambitions. I think both sides are in favor of fiscal responsibility for the government and individuals, living within our means and cutting the debt, the value of small business and entrepreneurship, investing In innovation and growing the economy, keeping America moving forward with a lean, nimble, effective, manageable government.

But despite the shared goals of the "right" and the "left" they can't have a meaningful conversation and the citizenry has become understandably hostile to a system that seems so intractable and rigged. The government has grown so byzantine and impenetrable that it feels inaccessible. The corrupting influence of unfettered cash flowing into the system by special interests has increased that inaccessibility by establishing a "pay to play" mindset in government from local to national levels that borders on – and probably is – criminal. It is my understanding that American democracy is meant to be by, for and of the people; it is government by consent of the governed to provide for the common welfare. It is my understanding that government's function in a democracy is to provide the advantage of scale, allowing individuals in a society to come together to undertake and achieve projects that require resources beyond their capacity. This isn't Socialism – it is the foundation of why we have democracy in the first place.

Even from the perspective of the most ardent free-market capitalist, this should make sense. Just looking back at recent history would seem to suggest that a productive free-market economy flourishes most in a stable society. To extrapolate from my lived experience (flawed methodology, I admit), I would suggest that a stable environment is a prerequisite for innovation and entrepreneurship, whether for an individual or a corporation. But on the individual level, if you know where your next meal is coming from and that the rent is going to be paid, if you live in a neighborhood free of drugs, violence, pollution and disease, you have that much more mental capacity to think about other things. If young people have stability in their lives and access to daily meals, good, safe schools with a minimum of bullies, good teachers and reasonable class sizes, they're more likely to focus on learning and apply that education to making the most of their lives. If you have some financial security after you graduate college and you're not wracked with debt, you have more freedom to risk new ventures and try new things. If you have a great idea for a business or project, you are much more likely to succeed if you have access to capital. And if innovation happens mostly in small start-ups, then directing the flow of moderate amounts of capital to a wider field of smaller, nimble ventures will probably yield greater results than huge investments in monolithic institutions.

It seems that the best way to have a flourishing, vibrant, productive capitalist economy is to provide support for the largest number of people to actively participate in that economy, not just as workers or consumers but as wealth and value generators. I'm not an economist but my lived experience (same caveat as before) includes 8 years of Reagan, 4 years of Bush I and 8 years of Bush II and from what

I've seen – and what many, many people have said before me – "trickle down economics" doesn't work. I look at it this way. If we imagine the country as a living organism with money as its lifeblood, then one can infer that this blood has got to move unimpeded through the circulatory system in order to distribute oxygen and nutrients to all the vital organs to keep the organism healthy. If you concentrate all the blood (money) in one place you could cause an aneurysm or stroke and kill it. Which kind of seems like what is happening now.

So if government's essential function is to create stable conditions for a flourishing capitalist economy, it seems that it would need to monitor and regulate the flow of capital through the system. In this scenario the question is not BIG government vs. SMALL government (as we keep hearing) but how much government do we need to create stability? What conditions need to exist to ensure a stable society where capitalism can work best? How does government foster those conditions and how much infrastructure does it take to accomplish? How can government be scalable/adaptable to achieve that in different iterations at different time and in different places?

In my previous essay I floated a few "blue sky" scenarios that, in this light, may not be as crazy as they sound, to wit:

> **Rebooting Representation**: Imagine a representative democracy that uses big data to create alternate voter sets independent of place? A system that moves beyond the two party binary into either radical individual representation or alternate aggregation structures? Could this include a more complex but transparent system that balances place-based resource allocation and distribution systems with other criteria? What would digital demography and representative democracy actually look like? It might look like this.
>
> **Rebooting Education:** Imagine a federally funded and strategically developed K-12 MOOC that centralizes core curriculum but decentralizes place-based education. The MOOC offers a curriculum developed through strategic analysis of knowledge and skills required for maximum jobs and growth nationally. The curriculum is predicated on national standards and taught locally by nationally accredited teachers. Additional coursework, tailored to regional variance and cultural settings, can be implemented on the local level. This curriculum can be provided to home schoolers, self-aggregated small schools that would either hire an accredited teacher or become accredited themselves. Subsidy then becomes available for these smaller, independent classrooms and bricks and mortar schoolhouses become an option, not a necessity. Government scales back its involvement in the expensive business of maintaining bricks and mortar facilities and top-heavy, bloated administrative structures while guaranteeing access to education to all and insuring at least a minimum level of preparedness for students in the 21st Century.

Now, maybe these ideas are fantastically naive or just plain bad. But what we need now is MORE IDEAS not less. And there are people much smarter and knowledgeable than myself who could apply digital thinking to our seemingly insurmountable national problems and come up with innovative, scalable solutions if we could only have the conversation. But apparently we can't because the amount of money at stake from lobbyists to politicians on both sides has destroyed any possibility of actual dialogue. So what are we to do? Let's look at Mexico, for instance. When I saw Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's *El Rumor del Incendio* at the TBA Festival, they projected on screen a section of the Mexican constitution called "Second Title, Chapter I: Of National Sovereignty and of the Form of Government" which reads:

> *Article 39 – National sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people. All public power comes from the people, and it is instituted for their benefit. The people have, at all times, the inalienable right to alter or modify the form of their government.*

How amazing is that? Who knew? And while this is not as explicitly stated in the U.S. constitution as it is in Mexico's, I think it is inferred. This is a democracy, the government is us, and we have a right to change it. And we should.

And what does this have to do with the performing arts? Everything.

Ancient Greece was the birthplace of both democracy and theater as we know it in The West. In this interview with Peter Burian, professor of classical studies and theater studies at Duke University, he says:

> *…participation of the audience in theater helped promote democratic life in Athens. The Athenian conception of democracy gave a central role to frank and open speech, and the theater was a privileged locus of such speech. The Greek theater's democratic character is not so much a matter of taking ideological positions that are certifiably democratic, but of participating in a culture of democratic discourse and expanding it to make heard the voices of women, foreigners, and slaves who had no place in the political institutions of the polis — speech mediated of course by the fact that male citizens acted all the parts. Greek drama includes a large number of powerful, dynamic and dangerous women!*

When asked why this occurred in Athens when it did, he goes on to say:

> *The answer from my perspective is a sort of "perfect storm" at Athens in the fifth century BC: the swift and concurrent development of a democratic ideology based on ideas of freedom of speech for all citizens and equality of all citizens as (at least potential) participants in governance, the flowering of a theatrical practice that formed the centerpiece of a festival dedicated to the god Dionysus — associated in Greek belief with ides of breaking down boundaries, loosing of tongues and liberation in general — and one of the most important civic as well as religious occasions of the Athenian calendar.*

And from what we understand of Ancient Greek theater, the performances were actually what today we might call "hybrid" or "multidisciplinary". The poetic texts were sung as well as spoken and danced, the actors wore masks and cothurni, new technology was regularly introduced and implemented – have you ever heard of a deus ex machina? Not just a literary device, it was an actual machine! Also interesting is that performances of Ancient Greek theater were funded by the *polis* (state-sponsored arts festivals!) and, supposedly, they were only performed once – truly ephemeral art.

So theater, dance, music, poetry and the technology associated with staging performance have been intrinsic to democracy since its origins. As I wrote in my essay "Re-Framing The Critic for the 21st Century":

> *…the arts – particularly the performing arts – provide a space to foster reflection, education and communication … the overall ecology of the arts, the "culture" sector, exists within a larger framework of Culture; it exists as a laboratory and an "auditorium" – place for people to be heard. The cultural sector exists as a place to engage with the ideas that shape our experiences of the world, to try and bridge the almost unfathomable gap between interiorities by making our inner lives manifest in the material world…*

Today as much as in Ancient Greece, live performance can serve as a nexus for conversation and confrontation, for engaging with the big ideas and challenges of our times and of the human condition, for interrogating the world as it is and modeling the world as we imagine it could be. I return to Chaikin in *The Presence Of The Actor*:

> *I have a notion that what attracts people to the theater is a kind of discomfort with the limitations of life as it is lived, so we try to alter it through a model form. We present what we think is possible in society according to what is possible in the imagination. When the theater is limited to the socially possible, it is confined by the same forces which limit society.*

But in order to do that effectively in contemporary society, the art has to be made with attention to and in the context of the conditions of contemporary cultural production. As I've said before, what if we imagine artists as knowledge workers in an information economy, transforming ideas into experience? I return here to the conclusion of my essay "The Politics of Cultural Production in Theater":

> *If art – particularly ephemeral art such as dance and theater – is meant to engage with our experience of the world as we live in it, and if the methods of production affect the received and perceived meanings of the art, then our production processes should reflect the dominant model of our times.*

Earlier I proposed that contemporary artistic practice is characterized by adherence to two values: investigation and interrogation and that these values are inherent in "devised" or "experimental" theater. I would further suggest that these characteristics are central to the knowledge production industries that define the Information Age. Thus we can look to the knowledge production industries for relevant models and frameworks to adapt to cultural production.

While this would consist of an entire treatise unto itself, I would like to suggest the following frameworks as a starting point:

Iterative Processes: We have come to accept software development as an iterative process. Software is released in beta and is revised and updated over time. Every so often a new version comes out that is so significantly improved that it might require a new number or name, but the product itself is never really done. This is a useful framework for looking at the developmental process of theater – either a single show or the work of an artist over time. Rarely is a show every really done. Anyone who has worked in the theater knows how much a show changes from opening night to closing. With some shows that change can be astonishing as actors discover new moments and generate new material; as writers, directors and designers discover what works and what doesn't. So too with artists – we should look at them as engaged in a long investigative arc and try and see each work both on its own and in the context of what came before.

Open Source: Open Source software development means that one person develops some code and gets it as far as they can on their own, then turns it over to a community of practice to revise, refine and improve the software. This framework is valuable both as a values system for collaborative creation on a single project and for the field at large. How can we look at what we do, as a field, as a collaborative process of imaginative investigation, of creating and re-mixing, sampling, revising and re-envisioning? How can we re-imagine our relationship to intellectual property and copyright?

Peer Review: Scientists regularly publish their research that is subject to peer review. The current theater ecology places the responsibility for reviewing productions with a third party, journalists, who are meant primarily to serve as advocates and advisors to the ticket-buying audience. The arts sector – particularly theater – would be well served by vigorous, challenging, public review and critical discourse by peers. Audiences should be thought of not as mere consumers, but participants in a public conversation.

More than just re-imagining cultural production we must adopt new models for how we look for and generate content, identify "stories", how we situate the work in the larger world beyond "the arts" and reassess how we define traditional ideas of artist and audience.

Usually when I hear people in the arts sector talk about "digital thinking" or technology they are either talking about how to use Twitter and Facebook to be a more effective marketer or they are talking about performances with a lot of video. Both of these are fundamental misunderstandings of what "digital thinking" is. Making and presenting art in the 21st century doesn't require using Twitter or video or computers at all: the work can be completely analog for that matter.

Digital Thinking is about being in the world in a way that acknowledges the relational shifts engendered by our experience of networked society. It is about being more sophisticated in our engagement with complexity, moving away from binary oppositional structures to multipoint frameworks; it is about moving from verticality to horizontalism, working rhizomatically, or working hierarchically by intent rather than by default.

This is an old example but most people's music players have a "shuffle" function. Brahms may coexist next to Outkast, Metallica, Beastie Boys and Miles Davis; as you listen you may not know what's coming next. In a world where people experience music this way, largely without prejudice, it behooves us to move beyond distinctions of high art vs. low art and develop alternate aesthetic criteria for evaluating creative work. This doesn't mean you can no longer make an LP or a cassette that is listened to in sequence – or publish only sheet music, as Beck recently did – it simply means presenting your music in a way that is intentional, not a default predicated on a production model for 33rpm vinyl records.

Digital Thinking also means changing the criteria distinguishing professional from amateur, possibly erasing the distinction entirely. Since the digital revolution the means of creative production are readily available to a much wider swath of the public. Thus many more people are able to create work with higher production values and get it out into the public sphere. But they're not all getting paid for it.

Most artists today have to work another job to subsidize their artistic practice. Current distinctions between "professional" and "amateur" seem to be predicated on whether you make a living from your art. But historically even great artists have always had "day jobs" or engaged in commercial applications of their creative talents to pay the bills. These days many artists work in what are now called "the creative industries", their art practice is often related to, informed by or an extension of their livelihood. Should these people – and their artwork – be deemed "amateur" solely because it does not produce sufficient revenue to support their material needs? Recalibrating the valuation of "professional" and "amateur" doesn't mean that we no longer distinguish artists of quality making good work from mediocre artists making bad work, it simply means that we needn't use financial success, academic credentialing, or the critical approbation of traditional "cultural authorities" as the *only* measures of value.

Just as importantly, Digital Thinking doesn't mean that all new performance has to be developed using technology or difficult to watch, either. Just because a performance has video, the Internet, cool gizmos and computer programming doesn't make it contemporary or cutting edge. Almost by definition any show based on Facebook or using Twitter is going to be stupid and horrible, with the possible exception of Ivo Van Hove's *Roman Tragedies*. Nor does it mean that these performances have to exist on the web or on mobile platforms or integrate these technologies at all.

What Digital Thinking does is ask us to interrogate our assumptions about our subject matter, what we're making, how we're making it and where we're presenting it. Digital Thinking demands intentionality, attention to user experience and context; it asks us to start from a question rather than a statement and that the performance proceed as an investigation.

Far from being a limitation, this approach opens up a universe of new possibilities for both form and content while making performance available to limitless new audiences. For instance, imagine bringing together performance makers interested in social practice with the technologists from Code For America? Here's what Code For America did in New Orleans:

> *The City of New Orleans wants to partner with Code for America to support and further legitimize the invaluable role neighborhood stakeholders continue to play in community revitalization. By developing a light-weight application to allow community stakeholders to submit bulk information to the city about their neighborhood, view existing relevant city data, and receive status for each of the on-going issues in their neighborhood, they will be better able to advocate and support their neighborhoods.*

Performance-makers could work with the technologists and communities of Code For America, translating data into human interaction, identifying stories, creating interactive or participatory performances and/or installations responding to or incorporating the gathered information. Whether the performance happens in a traditional venue, a non-traditional venue or site-specifically in public space, whether it takes a familiar form or something entirely new, artists can bring their practice to bear on making thoughtful, meaningful, expansive, engaging experiences for a wide variety of publics.

The field of the Performing Arts in the 21st Century is going to be about supporting artists in dialogue with each other across disciplines and putting artists in meaningful collaborative dialogue with innovative thinkers in other sectors; it is going to be about supporting artists who move beyond the confines of traditional structures and into new ways of thinking and making. They may *end up* making a play or a dance for a stage, but it should be an intentional decision that the chosen platform is the best one for the project.

By situating cultural production in 21st Century frameworks, performance can serve as a vital platform for discourse in modern American Democracy just as it did in Ancient Greece. I will resist the impulse to call for more public funding, but I will propose that as government funding for the arts diminishes, non-arts funders could be engaged in supporting specific arts projects and initiatives. The performing arts have a unique ability to bring people offline and into real space, together. They facilitate transforming the soft ties of social media into the solid connections of social interaction.

And if you think the connection between the arts and technology is a bridge too far, I direct you to this interview with Flickr co-founder Caterina Fake by Alexis Madrigal in The Atlantic, talking about her new startup, Findery. She says:

> *I think we are gaining a new appreciation for the here and now, for the place we live, for the people in our neighborhood, for groundedness. This may be something that comes from social-media exhaustion. You see the early indications of a return to the local.*

Then Madrigal asks her, "You are a longtime Internet person. Why do you care so much about sense of place?" She responds:

> *My background is in art. I was a painter and an occasional sculptor, and I really like materials – you know, stuff. Physical objects. The world and the trees and the sunshine and the flowers. And all of that doesn't seem to really exist out in the ether of the Internet. Bringing people back into that actual, feel-able world is very important. My life project is humanizing technology: making technology more real and bringing it back into human interactions.*

Times change and so do technologies. They inform and alter our perceptions of and interactions with the world around us. But the creative impulse is a constant that pervades all of human endeavor. Some people cultivate their creative capacities by becoming artists and some pursue other avenues. But it is that creative capacity, the desire to imagine the world as it might be and then work to make it so, that will determine our future. As the known world gives way to the unknown, as we move more fully from the age of industry to the age of information, we can endeavor to embrace new ways of thinking or we can cling to the cold comforts of old habits. We can enter into the future with despair and dire predictions or we can rise to the challenge of changing ourselves and our world to be more open, transparent, collaborative and free. It seems like an obvious choice to me.

Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (and Distribution)

Just before the Thanksgiving holiday I managed to see Ivo Van Hove's *Roman Tragedies* at BAM. Now I've seen a bunch of Van Hove's work and while I don't want to jump too completely onto the Europhile Bandwagon, pretty much every time I'm blown away, particularly when he deals with film. I remember seeing *Opening Night* and marveling at how intelligently he integrates the visual choreography of camera angles and framing into the staging. From *The Little Foxes* to *The Misanthrope* and pretty much every Van Hove show, whether using live-feed video or Second Life, he's pushing the edge in thoughtful, unexpected ways. But nothing prepared me for *Roman Tragedies*.

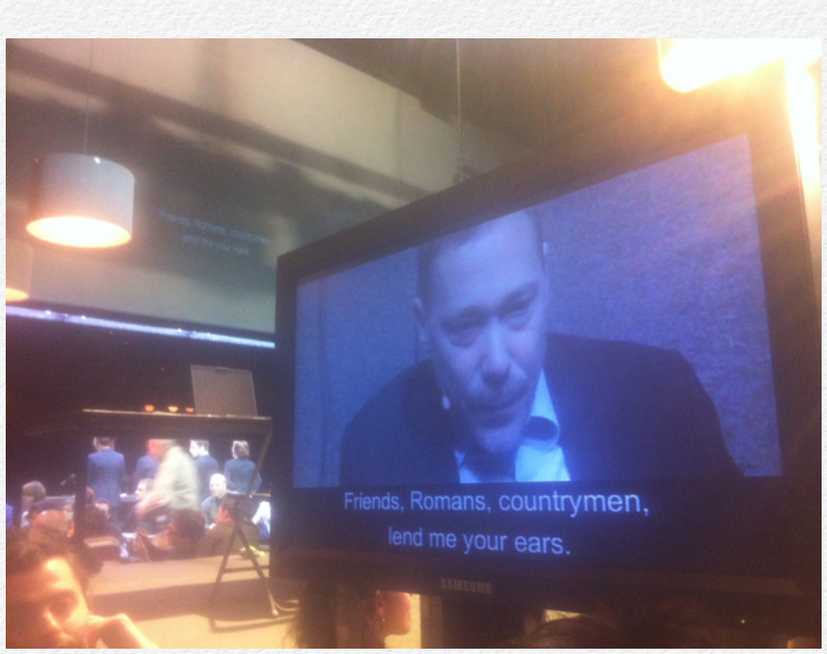


Photo taken from the stage of Roman Tragedies at BAM

I saw it on the Friday night – I was tired and in a bad mood and when I realized the show was nearly six hours long I was prepared to leave after the first hour. But then I walked into the BAM Opera House and encountered something I hadn't experienced in years – a huge, beautiful theater that was General Admission. Not since going to rock shows in the 80s and 90s had I had that slightly rebellious feeling of being an interloper into rarefied space. We're in this temple to high art, order and refinement, but we can wander anywhere we want: sit, stand, mill about. Upon entering the hall we were given a sheet of paper (not unlike *The Culturebot Guide To Einstein On The Beach*) that spelled out the order of scenes, exactly how long each scene would last, when the set changes and big battles were, etc. As we approached curtain time, regular updates came over the PA system telling us how long until the show began and encouraging us to tweet, take pictures, etc. (If you want to see people's tweets and pictures, just search **#romantragedies** on twitter.)

Then the show started and the theater opened up – we wandered on and off and around the stage, even up to the BAM Cafe to watch the events on the JumboTron, as if we were in the Barclay's Center down the street. We sat where we wanted, chased the action around the stage, into the seats and onto the streets, jostling for best positions, taking pictures, tweeting, talking to our friends, comparing what we saw. For the next 5 hours and 44 minutes (or so) we went barreling down a path of tragic destruction like an unstoppable freight train of epic disaster delivered in 21st century media saturation; never gimmicky or fake or gratuitous, Shakespeare for our time: mixed-up, mashed-up, remixed and re-imagined and all the more powerful for being so. From *Coriolanus* to *Julius Caesar* to *Antony and Cleopatra* we hurtled through the early history of the Roman Empire, birthed in blood and brutality and ever flirting with disaster. Epic actors with epic appetites and ambitions on a world stage brought into vivid high definition real life before your eyes, so far away in time yet so immediately relevant. It was so meta it broke through to the real.

I'm not actually going to bother talking about the performances because they were so completely flawless and extraordinary there's really not a lot to say. Among Van Hove's major accomplishments with *Roman Tragedies* are the following.

Theater

Van Hove made good on what so many directors promise but fail to deliver – a complete and total transformation of the theatrical space. Van Hove interrogated all the fundamental conditions of theater and made deliberate, conspicuous choices that influenced our relationship to the performance. 4th wall? Gone. Conventional ticketing and seating? Gone. No Talking/Texting/Tweeting/Pictures? Gone. Traditional notions of theatrical time? Gone, he gave us an outline of exactly what

was going to happen and when, yet somehow even as we knew what was inevitably to come, we were held rapt as the horror unfolded. It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of Van Hove's accomplishment at a time when so many American theater makers are talking about "non-traditional" theater and the theater establishment is seeking "innovation" but very few people are actually questioning most basic assumptions of presentation and practice. I'll go into this more in a later essay, but to my way of thinking, every theater maker in America should be compelled to see *Roman Tragedies*.

Language

Roman Tragedies was translated from Shakespeare into contemporary Dutch and then translated back into English for the subtitles. The hybrid of contemporary language with Shakespeare's original allowed the language to ring true to the modern ear while maintaining a heightened sensibility, an epic scale. The text at once suggested the linguistic hybridity and fluidity of the present moment while pointing to what language can do or could do when we push it. It also suggested the plasticity of the English language in Shakespeare's time, when it was still evolving at a clip, when English was a mongrel of Anglo-Saxon, German, French, Latin and who knows what else.

Video

The progression of the live video work was incredible, possibly the best I've ever experienced in a theater. The video work during *Coriolanus* was mostly wide shots, conversations framed like early political television shows with three or four serious men in serious suits seated behind a desk talking policy until the veneer of civility is broken. But by the time we get to Marc Antony's "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" speech, we are in the 21st century, the camera has moved in close to frame the speaker's face to suggest an invasive intimacy. At one point the actors on stage are actually seated in a semi-circle, facing each other as they debate. Looking at the monitors, however, we see that the edited and composited video footage suggests that they are facing away from each other. Van Hove has taken as much care with his visual composition and its implications as he has with the stage composition. The layers of meaning created by images are many and intertwined, resonating outward, ensnaring us in a web of mediation and complicity, even as the staging suggests emancipation and agency.

Internet

Most theater or dance or performance or art of any kind, generally speaking, that tries to use Twitter in any way, shape or form seriously sucks. Seriously. The idea of Tweet Seats is stupid. Twitter "conversations", however well-intentioned, are doomed to failure simply because the medium is not conducive to actual conversation. It is like using a tea spoon to carve a turkey. Or fortune cookie fortunes to write a novel. I find it fantastically frustrating that so many performance makers (dance, theater, visual art, whatever) don't seem to understand that different tools are used for different purposes, that just because something is "technology" doesn't mean it is "innovative", especially when it is being torqued to do something it isn't meant to do. This tends to include the very foundational elements of theater itself, which is something I will discuss further in an upcoming essay. BUT ANYWAY – Van Hove's use of twitter, most emphatically, did not suck. The Twitter feed was incorporated into a scrolling LED ticker across the proscenium arch that included edited tweets, action alerts that told you how long until major dramatic events would occur or the length of time remaining on a set change; the ticker established location and year, and every time someone died it flashed their birth and death years. By merging the twitter feed into all the other information on the ticker, Van Hove replicated the flow of information that we experience every day. By including our tweets at random we are simultaneously included in the construction of the piece and reminded of our own inefficacy; we can comment on the action and have our thoughts enter the universal information stream but we are powerless to change things. It is a profound statement on our relationship to media and our dangerous delusion of influence. *Roman Tragedies* seems to imply that we in the audience should more thoroughly investigate our relationship to power and what it means to be a spectator vs. a citizen.

This is where we transition to a conversation of digital reproduction and distribution, because, theoretically, anyone could have used their smartphone to video the entirety of *Roman Tragedies* and upload it to the web. It would take a huge memory card (or several memory cards) and some major bandwidth, but it is not beyond imagination that someone could do it. The thing is, even if someone did, I'd wager high stakes that it would have no impact on ticket sales, merchandising or any other potential revenue streams related to the production. If anything, it might drive ticket sales and boost revenue. First off, because there is no way, given the nature of the

production, that any single person could capture the entire experience. Secondly, a video – no matter how good – would just leave you wishing you could have been there. And this seems to be the thing that a lot of traditional performing arts people don't seem to understand – in The Age Of Digital Reproduction and Distribution, content can exist in multiple forms and be used by different people in different ways.

As Culturebot readers know, a few weeks ago I attended Danspace Project's "Conversation Without Walls" dedicated to a discussion of Ralph Lemon's "Some Sweet Day" platform at MoMA. I recorded the conversations, not really expecting to use it other than for reference. The discussions actually ended up being interesting and of value to the larger dance community, so I shared the recordings online. A few days later I received a call from Danspace asking me to take the recordings down and, being a good guy, I did, even without being told why. I did it out of respect and collegiality, but I'm not happy about it on principle, for a number of reasons. If it is an issue of people saying things in public that they don't want disseminated, then they should take their cue from Mitt Romney and be more discreet about what they say in open forums. If it is an issue of intellectual property, that is a different issue and, frankly, more problematic. As I mentioned above, in The Age Of Digital Reproduction and Distribution, content can exist in multiple forms and be used by different people in different ways. If someone listens to a bad quality recording of a panel discussion, that doesn't mean they won't buy the print catalog or, for that matter, a better quality recording of the same conversation that is officially sanctioned. Just look at The Grateful Dead and their long history of letting fans tape their shows and trade the tapes. Recently there was a thoughtful and thorough article in The New Yorker by Nick Paumgarten on the recorded legacy of The Grateful Dead:

> *I said I was interested in talking to [Phil Lesh] about the Dead's vast archive of live concert recordings, about how something intended to be spontaneous and ephemeral became a curated body of work.*
>
> *"It's interesting that that's become the focus, because we never felt that recording was suited to what it is that we do," he said. "Because it's so much in the moment. Because it's different every time. If you freeze a song in a recording, it's obviously going to be that way every time you listen to it. I remember classical recordings from my youth: there would be a slight bobble in our version of the Scherzo of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony every time I listened to it. And when I think about that piece, when I listen back to it in my mind, that bobble is there. So recordings have always seemed to me, personally, to be kind of a fly in amber, which was contrary to the spirit of the Grateful Dead."*



The Grateful Dead

> *What happens, though, if one has dozens upon dozens of versions of a song?*
>
> *"Like fairy tales or folk songs, all versions are true," he said. "The more versions there are, the truer it is. But we never thought about that in the beginning. There was never a plan. We just ass-backwardsed into everything." He went on, "If I thought about it, I would want to see the music just sort of osmose into the great*

cloud of music that's been created, that people just sing back and forth to one another. I don't care if it's rated highly. If in a hundred years people are still singing these songs back and forth to one another on the back porch, in a night club, a bar or the living room, that would be great."

This hints at the relationship between ephemeral forms, documentation and dissemination. First is the illusion of ephemerality. Ephemerality suggest a reliance on materiality for permanence. But the immaterial can persist through memory, both individual and collective. It can exist through myth and through received knowledge and traditions. In music it is as Lesh describes it, "the great cloud of music that's been created, that people just sing back and forth to one another." In a way, Van Hove is doing the same thing with Shakespeare. Shakespeare didn't invent those stories, he adapted them for his time as Van Hove did for his. Each generation modifies these primal stories and revives them anew. They never vanish completely, they just retreat into the ether until they are recalled into the material world.

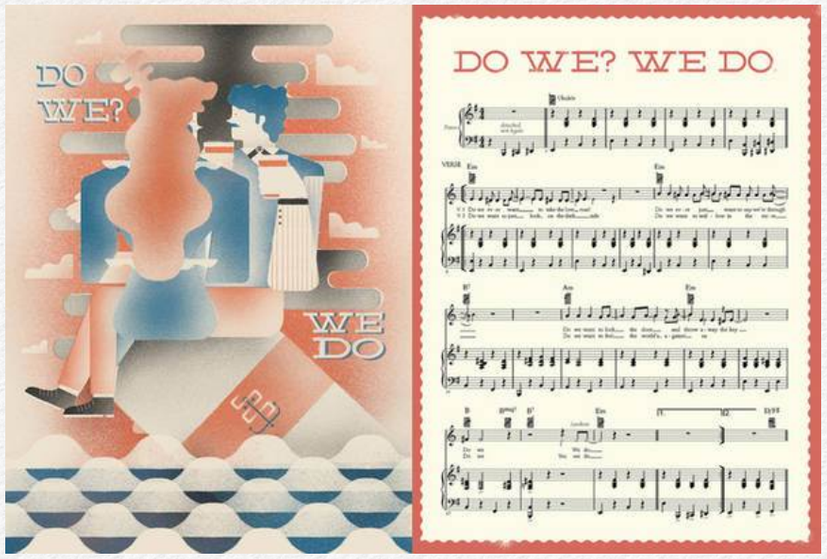
On a practical level, those Grateful Dead bootleg tapes created a multigenerational base of rabid fans who collected, traded and scrutinized thousands of concert recordings. As the body of taped concert recordings proliferated demand for concert tickets grew. People were familiar with the material before they ever saw the band, by the end of their career the Grateful Dead was one of the highest-grossing concert bands of all time – all with only one top ten hit, and that arriving towards the end of their career. After the band stopped touring they started selling re-mastered CDs of legendary concerts that had been available for years as bootlegs. Bob Dylan and countless other musicians have done the same thing. Audiences grow when content is freely accessible. That content encourages people to engage and grow and learn – the more you know, the more you appreciate, the more you appreciate the more you engage. It is a virtuous cycle.

As far as growing new audiences and engaging existing audiences, frankly, the world of contemporary dance has a lot of work to do. The charming and ingenious Girl Walk // All Day has probably been viewed by more people in the past 12 months than all the audiences of all contemporary dance venues in NYC combined. Choreographers and curators can sniff at it if they want (I don't know if they do or not, but it seems likely), but it is a significant project with widespread impact. It also hints at how the field of contemporary dance can look towards social and mass media for ways of developing, preserving and disseminating dance.

How many people know how to do Michael Jackson's *Thriller* dance from the music video? How many people know that Beyonce "Single Ladies" dance? Or for that matter, we all remember the Beyonce/Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker kerfuffle:



I know that contemporary dance is more difficult, esoteric and thoughtful than most "popular" dance – but how does one use the tools of popular culture to serve the purposes of contemporary dance? I think this really opens up the question of choreography vs. dance that has been such a hot topic lately among choreographer/thinkers like Michael Klien and Marten Spangberg. For instance, by now I'm sure you've heard that Beck's new album is sheet-music-only.



Will Burns [writes on Forbes.com]:

> *Beck fans the world over will be drawn to the "invitation" this sheet music presents. Go ahead, grab your guitar, find a friend who plays keys, get your brother to play drums, and then turn GarageBand on and record these Beck songs. And record them the way you want to record them. Be inspired by the imagery in the packaging, be inspired by the compositions, but generate your own takes. The idea of an unproduced album is beautiful for this reason alone, and is likely the primary driver.*

This is a totally brilliant, genius gesture that at once acknowledges the challenges of intellectual property and copyright law in the Internet Age while simultaneously launching a full-frontal assault on passive consumption of entertainment product. You couldn't ask for a more significant proposal from an artist who is both widely popular and, frequently, wildly experimental. (btw, here's an interview between Beck and Philip Glass.)

So imagine if we really did detach choreography from dance? As I mentioned in an earlier essay, when I was in Minneapolis in September I started asking choreographers how they taught dances and how they remembered the movements from any given work, much less numerous works. Most of them told me they had an idiosyncratic writing practice to help them remember. Some actually wrote words, narratives and text. Most had some unique, individual self-generated system of squiggles, shapes, lines and figures that served as mnemonics or pictographs.

What if choreographers released those idiosyncratic texts as scores and allowed anyone, anywhere to recreate the dances from the words, squiggles, shapes, lines, figures, mnemonics or pictographs? While it is not necessarily a new idea, it certainly has taken on new meaning since instructions-based Fluxus concerts. (NB: Beck's grandfather was a Fluxus artist). For that matter Charles Mee has turned over a number of his plays to the public for radical re-purposing, you only have to pay if you try and produce it exactly as written. Even Mike Daisey has offered the text of *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* for free download, to be performed by anyone, anywhere, however they want.

What might we discover if we look back before the player piano and the Victrola changed everything forever? How can we learn from the past while re-imagining the future?

We undoubtedly live in the Information Age and must re-think everything we assume we know about creativity, intellectual property and copyright. We must re-think ownership and we must re-think the relationship of revenue and commodity to performance whether it is music, dance, theater, live art or visual art performance. It is happening, if slowly. Just a few days ago Derek Khanna, a tech-savvy young Republican thinker, released a memo that questions (and refutes) the basic premises of existing copyright law and called for sweeping reforms. When the MPAA and the RIAA saw it, apparently they freaked out and demanded that it be retracted by the Republican Study Committee, under whose letterhead the memo was released. And of course it was retracted because big business gets what it wants. Not to get into it here, but technological innovation might well be the way forward for re-framing political dialogue in this country.

But for now, let's start with the fact that digital reproduction and distribution of content is here to stay. For better or for worse, we have to revisit all of our assumptions about our relationship to creativity, the products of that creativity and how works of intellectual property exist in the marketplace. Even a marketplace in the gift

economy. Performance makers, those whose practice is in the construction of so-called ephemeral experiences, need to be wrestling with these issues as thoroughly, thoughtfully and proactively as every other sector where “content” is generated.

Engaging with the conditions of contemporary life should be a given in the creation of contemporary performance. Interrogate your assumptions and make deliberate choices, but don’t react out of fear, nostalgia or unthinking Luddite biases against the technological world. Contemporary life is lived in a cloud of information – content – and even in the midst of that chaos and through the mediated haze we struggle blindly forward, striving to connect, that is what makes us human. And it is the question of staying human in a complex and contradictory world that draws us back to Shakespeare, the Romans and the Greeks, for we are eternally asking the same question in an ever-changing world.

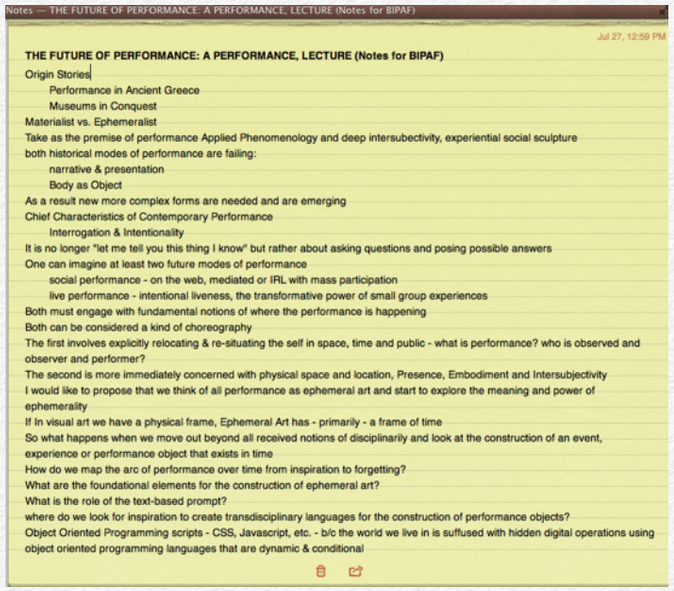
The Future of Performance: A Performance, Lecture

AUDIO 4.1

The Future Of Performance

Andy Horwitz at The Glasshouse Project in Brooklyn as part of the first Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival. July 26, 2013.

Here are the notes on my phone that I worked from:


Notes — THE FUTURE OF PERFORMANCE: A PERFORMANCE, LECTURE (Notes for BIPAF)

Jul 27, 12:59 PM

THE FUTURE OF PERFORMANCE: A PERFORMANCE, LECTURE (Notes for BIPAF)

Origin Stories

- Performance in Ancient Greece
- Museums in Conquest

Materialist vs. Ephemeralist

Take as the premise of performance Applied Phenomenology and deep intersubectivity, experiential social sculpture

both historical modes of performance are failing:

- narrative & presentation
- Body as Object

As a result new more complex forms are needed and are emerging

Chief Characteristics of Contemporary Performance

- Interrogation & Intentionality

It is no longer "let me tell you this thing I know" but rather about asking questions and posing possible answers

One can imagine at least two future modes of performance

- social performance - on the web, mediated or IRL with mass participation
- live performance - intentional liveness, the transformative power of small group experiences

Both must engage with fundamental notions of where the performance is happening

Both can be considered a kind of choreography

The first involves explicitly relocating & re-situating the self in space, time and public - what is performance? who is observed and observer and performer?

The second is more immediately concerned with physical space and location, Presence, Embodiment and Intersubjectivity

I would like to propose that we think of all performance as ephemeral art and start to explore the meaning and power of ephemerality

If In visual art we have a physical frame, Ephemeral Art has - primarily - a frame of time

So what happens when we move out beyond all received notions of disciplinarily and look at the construction of an event, experience or performance object that exists in time

How do we map the arc of performance over time from inspiration to forgetting?

What are the foundational elements for the construction of ephemeral art?

What is the role of the text-based prompt?

where do we look for inspiration to create transdisciplinary languages for the construction of performance objects?

Object Oriented Programming scripts - CSS, Javascript, etc. - b/c the world we live in is suffused with hidden digital operations using object oriented programming languages that are dynamic & conditional

Observations & Speculations

5

Observations, Reflections & Speculations //
Notes From Berlin (Part I) //
Notes From Berlin (Part II) //
Territorial Pissings //
Being There

Observations, Reflections & Speculations

Andy's Year-End Orphans – Random Ideas on Art, Culture and Value

PREFACE

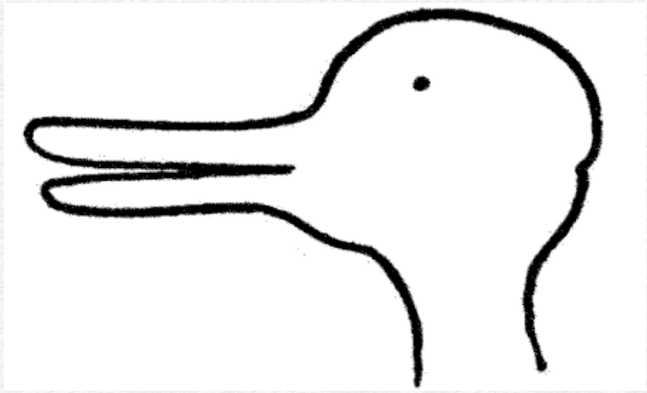
Like many people, I jot down ideas as I go through the world – on my phone, in little notebooks, cocktail napkins, scraps of paper, email drafts and odds and ends that end up in forgotten corners of my apartment. Some of these little idea orphans are lucky enough to grow up into full-blown essays, some of them are doomed to remain flotsam and jetsam in my stream of consciousness.

I have at least four big essays in process already and sometimes it feels like I will explode if I don't get it all out there as soon as possible, so as part of my end-of-year taking stock of everything, I gathered some of the more promising thoughts and am publishing them here. I hope they are interesting, helpful, provocative or at least entertaining.

Why am I doing this? Because I have come to see the Internet as a platform for iterative processes – one where an idea can start with a tweet, move into a blog post, then an essay, then a book or a performance or a song or a film or some combination thereof. Rather than experiencing each iteration as an end unto itself, we can experience this as process, an ever-evolving exploration of an idea or set of ideas, performed in public, often collaboratively. This, I think, is the heart of what it means to create in the 21st Century whether in digital or analog environments – an awareness and acknowledgement that it is ALL process.

Life is, in fact, a rehearsal – a never-ending perpetual now, subject to revision and revisiting, driven by an aspiration towards perfection, towards realization, towards culmination that may never actually arrive. How you do anything is how you do everything and "end results" are the culmination of countless small decisions, behaviors and processes, each current moment determined by those that have come before and determining what is to come. So be present, be mindful, strive towards right action in all things and together we'll keep this whole thing moving in balance and towards the good.

RANDOM IDEAS ON ART, CULTURE & VALUE



ON CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

Went to see Rude Mech's Dionysus in 1969. Had a chat with Schechner in the lobby beforehand. He had just seen the Builders Association show at BAM, which I missed. Had a theoretical discussion on hotness and coolness in media and the diverse uses of media, mediation in performance. After the show I thought about how Dionysus was mediated by time – watching it was like being in two points on the space/time continuum simultaneously – inhabiting the multilayered falsity of the real moment created by Rude Mechs at NYLA while simultaneously inhabiting the real time memory of one's imagination of the time/space of the original.

How to talk about contemporary practice in community-based environments? Connection, juxtaposition, tangible examples of linking disparate things; like humorous or unexpected similes in hip-hop lyrics to serve as pedagogy for teaching art practice, demonstrating fundamental human instinct to make connections that are not necessarily interpretive.

What is contemporary? I would say that contemporary practice embraces a multitude of methods, tactics and aesthetics but is fundamentally distinguished by being investigative – starting with a question rather than a statement – and being interrogative, not assuming the accepted meaning of any given site, framework, gesture, relationship, meaning or process, but interrogating those assumptions instead.

What is American? I think about this a lot. I was in conversation with a French cultural professional talking about Judson's enormous influence on the French and how it seems as if America hasn't had a new idea ever since. The irony of the whole thing is that so many of the people who venerate Judson now are as resistant to change as the establishment was then. I haven't studied it enough but I think Yvonne Rainer's No Manifesto and the idea of looking to pedestrian movement are distinctly American – stripping away pretense and affectation and striving, I think, towards a democratization of dance in a way that spoke to the cultural and political moment. Can we move on from Judson now? Can we stop looking backwards, start looking forwards, look around us at what is really here now and make something new?

Not that I don't appreciate work that looks to Europe for inspiration, I do. But I think we've censored ourselves too long, been too beholden to Europe's approval and taste. There is something noble, beautiful and quixotic about Americans and a complexity that Europe doesn't always want to acknowledge. Maybe it is because we so often seem unsophisticated and overly earnest, not appropriately world-weary, because frankly is it not part of the American temperament to put on airs. America is the place where we say, "Oh, that's impossible? Great, I can't wait to try and do it." America is the place where we cling onto the naïve hope that this grand experiment, as flawed as it is, is still worth trying to keep alive and moving along the arc towards justice. We know we're fucked up, we know we're imperfect but we struggle on anyway. American artists show that they WORK. They have other jobs, they don't make money at their art, but they do it anyway – without support, without appreciation and without recognition. And the work shows the work, because that's who we are. It's like I wrote in that essay, "Detroit and Other Apocalypses":

> *And I'm watching great new work from Karen Sherman and Morgan Thorson, from Hijack, from these kids called Supergroup and I'm thinking about The Replacements, Husker Du, Soul Asylum and Trip Shakespeare, The Jayhawks, the Wallets and, of course, Prince. I started thinking about my days in Seattle, about DIY and punk rock and "alternative" culture and "just get in the van". I started thinking about Detroit, the city, home of Motown, the MC5 and Iggy & The Stooges, the White Stripes, even Eminem. And I started thinking that as sophisticated as I think I might get, I'm also just a kid from the suburbs of Baltimore who grew up on garage rock and 'zines and aimless car rides all night long; a child of trips to the inner city to see punk rock bands who traveled in vans across the country to play in abandoned lofts for other misfit kids, who crashed on couches and smoked cigarettes and drank beer in parking lots, who nurtured their discontent and inchoate dreams of revolution and change. And I'm thinking, see,* that's *America. Or at least, that's* my *America – and its not the failure of the Suburban American Ranch House Dream, it's the promise of everything that is built both within it and in reaction to it. In America artists work for a living, we do it in our garages, we do it low budget and we do it ourselves. And as much as we would like to get paid for it, as much as we would like respect for it, we do it no matter what it takes, because we're punk rock and we have dreams and we have energy and we're indomitable and maybe we're a little more earnest than we like to let on, maybe we're a little less ironically detached than our European friends because hey, underneath the irony is that slightly embarrassing but always burning flame of idealism. So we put songs by The Bangles and Kim Carnes in our shows with a nudge and a wink, but underneath we know its because we actually* like *those songs, we do. And that is who we are – a mixed-up ball of hope and confusion, irony and earnestness, pluck and lethargy, a dream we still believe we can save from dying.*

ON THE PERFORMING ARTS ECOLOGY

What if we just did less better?

What is the role of arts and culture in civic society in the 21st Century? How do large institutions dedicated to the preservation and presentation of historical works from the Western Canon co-exist with institutions (usually smaller) dedicated to the creation, development and distribution of contemporary work that reflects the diversity and complexity of 21st Century America – its ideas, aesthetics and conditions?

The big institution/little institution binary is outmoded and dysfunctional: get rid of it. Think about scale and integration, symbiosis, national landscape. Not every town needs an opera, symphony and/or ballet; not every symphony, opera, ballet needs a traditional "full" season.

The funding system needs to re-align to a new landscape. In theater, for instance, big institutions like Roundabout, MTC, Playwrights Horizons, The Guthrie, etc. should either be moved into a different category or into the for-profit sector. They exist in a market economy where they serve as development spaces for film and television creative professionals or for Broadway. Move them intentionally and clearly into that development process and let big media companies and commercial Broadway producers underwrite that system.

Arts institutions that persist in the "presenter" should be evaluated and funded differently than arts organizations that embrace an "engager" model. Performing arts institutions need to re-imagine themselves, like libraries, as civic spaces and adapt to the 21st Century the same way libraries are.

Yes, the arts sector is underfunded but funding alone is not what creates a culture of scarcity – it is misallocation, waste and inefficiency. Valuable resources regularly go to waste because of insufficient, inefficient, poorly designed and uncoordinated aggregation and distribution systems. We have an insufficient national resource-sharing infrastructure. Space, for example. Many universities and regional theaters have spaces that go unused because there is no system for allocating space to non-university organizations.

We need to facilitate national resource & knowledge sharing, support the collaborative inter-regional cultural production, support inter-regional cultural conversation and engagement.

It is problematic that grant panels are so often comprised solely of presenters. They end up, understandably, funding their seasons. Grant panels should be diverse, including artists, academics, presenters, critics – people who comprise the entire ecology and can look at work from a diverse perspectives without necessarily being in a position to benefit from the outcome.

We need to de-link funding for cultural production from institutions because they develop elaborate bureaucracies which diverts those funds from their essential mission-mandated activities.

You can have a day job and still be a professional artist. Most do. Your artistic professionalism is not dictated by your source of income. In any case, the distinction between "professional" and "amateur" is not always useful and, in fact, most people are amateurs until they are professionals. Does that mean they're not what they say they are until they get paid for it? An open question. Maybe we need to re-frame "success"

That being said: reject professionalism. Nobody needs an MFA to learn how to act in regional theater. Nobody really needs a Masters in Arts Administration, either. One could posit that the professionalization of the sector has created significant barriers to entry for people of limited means, thus decreasing diversity of administrators and diversity of artists & audiences served, not to mention social mobility by failing to bring people of different classes and backgrounds together. There is a class system in the arts – it is real and it is significant and gets worse every year.

ON VISUAL ART vs. PERFORMING ARTS

Visual arts training involves peer criticism that is sorely lacking in performing arts training. There is a lot the contemporary performing arts can learn from visual art around critical discourse, contextual writing, rigor and value.

The striving for "the real" is different than the artful creation of verisimilitude and is pointless and foolish. The visual arts' quest for "the real" and "the praxis of everyday life" is as misbegotten as theater's aspiration towards "psychological realism". All art is artificial by definition and cannot be other.

They're so often so literal, visual arts people, with surprisingly little imagination. Intellect, as valuable as it is, has completely overtaken empathy or insight; inhabiting a complete unwillingness to cede control over the narrative to anyone, even the artist. Visual art world resists subjectivity.

Through its fetishization of "de-skilling" and rejection of craft, the visual arts world reveals it has no respect for or understanding of the creative practice of performers: actors, dancers, musicians. Musicians perhaps are more tangible to them because it involves playing an instrument; the skill is visible and materially accessible. But actors and dancers? No comprehension whatsoever. But look at some of our dancers or remarkable actors; they perform extraordinary feats of skill and artistry – it is all the more stunning for being mostly invisible.

ON EPHEMERALITY & MATERIALITY

We know that things exist outside of materiality because we have memory. So what is that place of memory and history? Where is it?

Ephemerality is another state of being parallel and different but equal to materiality. See the Hindu idea of samsara.

In the arts this leads to a privileging of object culture over ephemeral culture because materiality creates the illusion of permanence and thus the immortality of the ego-self. But materiality is inherently subject to entropy and decay, the cultivation of an awareness of ephemerality, art forms that explore the creation, decay and re-creation of the ephemeral, allow for the persistence of memory over long arcs of time. Collective memory is subject to transformation but not disappearance in the sense of material decay.

ON DIGITAL CULTURE, ART & THE INFORMATION AGE

One might take this idea of ephemerality and materiality and connect it to the emerging realms of digital culture. Imagine Digital Culture as an ongoing exploration and negotiation of the interplay between the material and the ephemeral. In the mechanical age the world around us was defined by materiality – a clock tower operated on mechanical systems we could understand, touch, see and explain. Now our watches, our writing implements – our material lives – operate through algorithms and non-physical mechanisms, hidden operations and abstract data. We are ever hovering above and immersed within the ephemeral operation of the invisible world.

Ideas persist. Memory persists. Life persists: it is process not beholden to form.

We should apply the principles of open source software development and iterative processes to the development, creation and distribution of performing arts. There is no final product, no end product, only a consistent striving towards a more perfect realization of an idea.

Conduct your research in public, share your data and learning, acknowledge negative outcomes as well as positive outcomes, be available for peer review and criticism, listen and learn from others.

Imagine artists as knowledge workers in an information economy, transforming ideas into experience.

Hypertext is only the most recent iteration of the very human urge to create meaning by connecting disparate things. Whether it is playing the geography game when meeting a stranger (identifying shared experiences to find some commonality, no matter how tenuous) or whether it is about connecting ideas, objects, moments. We want to link things.

ON POLITICS

If the "-ism" suffix is meant to describe a values system based on the noun to which it is attached, then capitalism says that capital is the most important thing and socialism says that society is the most important thing. So I guess I'm a socialist, because I believe people are more important than money.

That being said, I'm not opposed to capitalism – it is just that I believe capitalism works better in an environment of social stability.

Does the rise of a technocratic class point to a possible third way, a new era in Imagining America? Can we move the ever-evolving dream of America fully into the

information age? Can we change the conversation from a binary and inherently regressive framework to one that is multipoint, nuanced and future-facing?

For instance: the question is not BIG government or SMALL government, it is what is government meant to do and how can it be scalable/adaptable to achieve that in different iterations at different times and in different places?

Apropos of “capitalism vs. socialism” – my understanding is that government’s function is to provide the advantage of scale, allowing individuals in a society to undertake and achieve projects that require resources beyond their capacity. If a productive “free-market” economy flourishes in a stable society, then the government’s function is to provide stability. How does it do that and how much infrastructure does it take to accomplish that?

Can we reimagine representative democracy beyond place-based representation or develop a more complex but transparent system that balances place-based resource allocation and distribution systems with other criteria? What would digital democracy actually look like? It might look like this.

Was thinking about education – imagine a federally funded and strategically developed K-12 MOOC that centralizes core curriculum but decentralizes place-based education. So the MOOC offers a curriculum predicated on national standards and additional coursework, tailored to regional difference, can be implemented on the local level. Reduce the reliance on bricks & mortar, top-heavy administrative structures and bureaucracy but guarantee access to education to all while insuring at least a minimum level of preparedness for students in the 21st Century.

Republican/Democrat binary system is outmoded and dysfunctional. Get rid of it.

During Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol’s show El Rumor del Incendio at the TBA Festival, they projected a section of the Mexican constitution: “Second Title, Chapter I: Of National Sovereignty and of the Form of Government”, which reads: Article 39 – National sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people. All public power comes from the people, and it is instituted for their benefit. The people have, at all times, the inalienable right to alter or modify the form of their government. How amazing is that? Who knew?

Don’t be a spectator in your own life. Don’t confuse the appearance of participation for the real thing. Reject passivity, reject consumption, reject ennui, reject corporately manufactured entertainments, reject hypnosis, reject the assumption that things are now as they ever were and so will they remain. Nothing is as it was and nothing is as it will be. Resist romanticism, resist nostalgia, question everything and judge for yourself.

ON TEXT AND WRITING

Play scripts, written musical scores and choreographic scores are similar in that they are all text-based prompts for the re-incarnation of ephemeral arts, dependent on interpreters. What do they hold in common and how do they differ? What conversations can we have about the way these text-based prompts operate in different ways to negotiate their expression in time, space, sound, embodiment and meaning?

The utilitarian practice of writing has become so ubiquitous and familiar to most people that they seem to forget that it is actually a very difficult art form.

The transcription of everyday language is not “writing” and an aspiration towards the pedestrian in writing for the stage is not only old-fashioned, it is a futile, asinine attempt at verisimilitude masquerading as creativity. It is writing by unimaginative people who prefer the known to the mysterious, the familiar to the complex, the confirmation of our assumptions rather than interrogation of the known. Please stop. Go away.

In this day and age the idea of theater as a medium primarily for “storytelling” is weak and facile. Other mediums do storytelling better. Being a playwright is not about telling stories. It is about creating imagined worlds through rigorous writing practice. The very idea of “telling a story” is insufficient to the task of portraying real life or providing insight into the contemporary condition. If theater is, in part, about a collective journey of discovery, then the ubiquity and familiarity of “story” almost inherently resists or at least inhibits the possibility of the discovery of the new. Story is only one of almost infinite uses and outcomes of writing.

Writing is about language, rhythm, meter, meaning, tone; writing for the stage is about writing to be spoken or sung.

Writing for Television is an art form but has only become one in the past ten years or so. Writing for Film may never become an art form, because it is such a director's medium.

An essay is the performance of the process of discovering an idea and how you do that is style. (This is transcribed exactly from a conversation I have had with Deborah Stein in explanation of her approach to teaching expository writing.) Connect this to Criticism as creative practice.

A READING LIST

Too many books and articles have crossed my path and come up in conversation this year to name all of them. Here are some of the books I've re-visited or discovered, begged, borrowed & stolen over the past year:

Tim Etchells, Certain Fragments
Claire Bishop, Artificial Hells
Shannon Jackson, Social Works
Matthew Ghoulish, 39 Microlectures
Jacques Ranciere, The Emancipated Spectator
Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays
Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Some of them made it to my Amazon Wish List since I don't own them and would like to. There are many more that are not included here. Feel free to buy me books you think I should know.

Have a happy, healthy, productive and meaningful 2013!!

Notes From Berlin (Part I)



Self Portrait @ Brandenburg Gate

Every time I come out from America I feel as if I am waking from a dream. The plane descends, I disembark, proceed through passport control and out into the air of wherever I am; the fog lifts, the curtains part – choose your metaphor. We are so insulated here: by geography, by media, marketing and materialism, by the overwhelming multitude of consumer choices between virtually indistinguishable products and services; by our luxurious distance from the brutality and violence in the world of which we are largely unaware.

On Saturday May 4, 2013 I landed in Berlin, Germany, for the first time in my life. A generous colleague at the Goethe-Institut in New York, Wenzel Bilger, had recommended me to be included along with 30+ other theater professionals from around the world – producers, curators, writers and academics – for a week long symposium at the 50th annual Theatertreffen, curated and produced by The Berliner Festspiele. It was an extraordinary, thought-provoking week of remarkable insights and challenged assumptions. I found myself simultaneously wrestling with three pillars of my identity: curator/critic, American and Jew.

Given the scope of the experience and the conceptual landscape covered, I feel compelled to divide this into two essays, the first a series of critical reflections on theater inspired by the symposium and the plays themselves, the second a series of more personal thoughts inspired by the city of Berlin and the companions with whom I spent a very rigorously scheduled but extremely fulfilling week. (This first part is quite long and may be downloaded in its entirety here as a PDF.)

I would like to thank Dr. Rene Rubbeling of the German Consulate General in NYC and Wenzel Bilger of The Goethe-Institut New York for making the trip possible. I am also most pleased to thank Ms. Susanne Traub, Desk Officer for Theater and Dance at the Goethe-Institut's head office in Munich, for organizing and leading the symposia, and the fantastic team from Goethe-Institut Berlin – Boris Abel, Özlem Cosen, Natalija Yefimkina and Moritz Meutzner – for their above-and-beyond efforts to make this trip meaningful, informative and great fun.

THEATERTREFFEN



Theater in Germany is serious business. From the ideas and work of the iconic Bertolt Brecht to the more recent innovations of Frank Castorf at the Volksbuhne and the pioneering theoretical and applied work of Hans-Thies Lehmann at the University of Giessen, the scope, reach and global influence of German theater is undeniable. While one may agree or disagree with the particular merits of the Stadttheater acting style (lots of shouting) and the pronounced (if complex and conflicted) chauvinism of German theatre culture, one must certainly admire the ambition, artistic excellence and rigor of the work, the system of support, the commitment to the form and Germany's underlying belief in theater as a space for lofty civic discourse.

Over the course of seven days at Theatertreffen in Berlin I saw many productions, met directors, dramaturges, critics and curators and began to get a sense of how this system works, how it operates in the culture at large and what it might mean.

Every performance I attended, each in a massive theater, was full. Partially this is due to the role of theater in German public life – more on this in a moment – but I would venture to guess that this is also due in some part to the intentional development of what I have been told is called Bildungsburgertum – basically an educated upper middle class. From what I've gathered in my cursory research, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian philosopher and founder of the University of Berlin, developed a set of educational ideals in the late 18th century based on Classicism and the notion of human perfectibility through education. These ideas influenced the cultural discourse on the relationship of the individual to the State and form the underpinning for an ongoing commitment to educational access for the citizens of Germany. [NB: this is anecdotal inference on my part and subject to verification/revision.] So not only does Germany have a commitment to theater as a form, they have invested in building audiences through education.

The centrality of theater to civic life in Germany is supported by a Stadttheater (State Theater) system that nearly defies the comprehension of most non-Germans. The Federal Republic of Germany consists of sixteen partly sovereign constituent states, each of which has at least one State Theater, often more. (Once again, this is based on sketchy notes written under the influence of jet lag, so this may require fact checking.) The theaters are amply supported through both state and federal funding and citizens are as invested in the success and reputation of their hometown State Theater as they are in a soccer team, in part because every year they are competing to make it to Theatertreffen in Berlin.

Now fifty years old, Theatertreffen is like the Super Bowl or Final Four of German Language Theater. For the 2013 festival the jury of critics saw and considered more than 420 productions from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. At their final meeting, the seven jurors chose the ten "most remarkable" productions of the last season to be presented during the festival in Berlin. The festival attracts people from all over the country and the world to see the state of Germany's State Theater – who is up, who is down, who is the new talent and what is the condition of the old masters, who are the new actors to watch, who are the new playwrights and what are the new ideas.



Constanze Becker in Thalheimer's "Medea"

My colleague Meiyin Wang and I arrived in Berlin on Saturday, May 4, a day before the conference officially began. We spent the morning and afternoon wandering the city, warm and leafy green, acclimating to the new environment and makes Vines of me reading advertisements and street signs an a bad German accent. That evening I saw my first Theatertreffen production, Michael Thalheimer's *Medea*, produced by Schauspiel Frankfurt at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele.

I use the possessive when referring to Thalheimer because Germany's system is known as regietheater, or "Director's Theater". The underlying premise of the German State Theater system seems predicated on the idea that the Ancient Greek Classics are the highest form of theatrical aspiration and accomplishment, followed by the German greats like Goethe and Schiller and then, maybe, other Western greats such as Shakespeare, perhaps Chekhov or Ibsen. In this system, a director

builds his reputation by his staging of the classics. His task (and it is almost always a "he") is to engage with the Greeks in a new way, to find a distinctive presentational aesthetic that conveys his singular interpretive vision of the grand themes of Classical texts.

Thalheimer's aesthetic is stark and spare. The stage design is minimal, the play opens on a darkly massive empty stage across which a single old woman, Medea's elderly nurse, tramps slowly and deliberately, to convey the story thus far. As I recall she is then joined by another woman, the sole representative of the chorus of Corinthian women, to narrate the unfolding horror. But the true moment of startling awakening is when Constanze Becker enters as Medea. It is quite impossible to convey in words Ms. Becker's charisma, power, authority and presence. With a laser focus of intention supported by incredible physical and emotional intensity, her embodiment of Medea was stunning and moving. She was the perfect complement to Thalheimer's clean visual aesthetic and spare style delivering Peter Krumme's economic, effective translation of Euripides' text with alternately fury, guile and despair. (I actually don't know how it sounded in German, since I don't speak it, but the English surtitles were quite good.)

Thalheimer has reduced the cast to seven actors total, a not unprecedented idea and one we see later in other productions in the festival. But his staging is one of precision and stillness where actors enter with clear physical identities, establish a strong base stance and deliver the text from deep in the diaphragm. To my imagining it refers to an operatic style of delivery that one might associate with classical oratory. It is a welcome rejection of psychological realism and suggests that the total commitment of physical embodiment in service of the text will create the necessary scope of heightened emotion and drama.

This aesthetic clarity allows us to see the grand themes and conflicts as if in relief, unobscured by the reductive psychological conceits of modernity. Perhaps it is because I have been reading David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years* that I felt Jason's betrayal of Medea so strongly. Graeber proposes the existence of what he calls "human economies" in the ancient world where societies "held a radically different conception of debt and social relations, based on the radical incalculability of human life and the constant creation and recreation of social bonds through gifts, marriages and general sociability." (Wikipedia) In this construction, Medea's actions in service of Jason create a debt that cannot possibly be repaid. Medea has intentionally ripped herself from her social context and all the cultural attributes that form her status in her native land. She has, for love, enslaved herself to Jason and become subject to his whim. His betrayal, made all the worse by his revealing of himself to be callow and opportunistic, not only eviscerates the core meaning of Medea's existence, but demonstrates that he was not worth her sacrifice to begin with. Thus the inexorable path towards tragedy and destruction.

As the tragic plot is set unstoppably in motion, the entire back wall of the set, with Medea on it as if on a balcony addressing the chorus, moves to the foot of the stage, sweeping Jason and the sole chorus member along with it. It is at once completely unsubtle and obvious and incredibly powerful. The rest of the horror unfolds at the foot of the stage with one mournful soliloquy after another recounting the gore and terror Medea has unleashed as she seeks her revenge – or more accurately, some form of justice.

For perhaps the first time I was not only deeply attached to the plot itself, but the entire production actually resonated as metaphor with implications for the relationship of the individual and the state, interpersonal relationships, the complexity of social negotiations, the fragility of individual status and esteem and the perilous role of political and military diplomacy in determining the conditions of everyday life. This richness of meaning and experience was hardly expected.

I have to admit I entered the theater with no small amount of trepidation. Two hours of Greek tragedy in German with no interval, after a transatlantic flight with no sleep, did not seem promising. But even before the Theatertreffen Symposium had officially begun I had already been presented with some of the key themes, ideas and issues that would unfold over the next week.

Later in the week people told me that in this production Thalheimer was recycling his old tricks, tried and true. This may be the case, but for an American theatergoer conditioned to watching mediocre Method actors over-emoting in overstuffed, over-conceptualized, dramaturgically unsound and visually cluttered vanity productions of the Classics, this *Medea* was a welcome salve and promising augur of things to come.



The Cast of “Murmel Murmel”

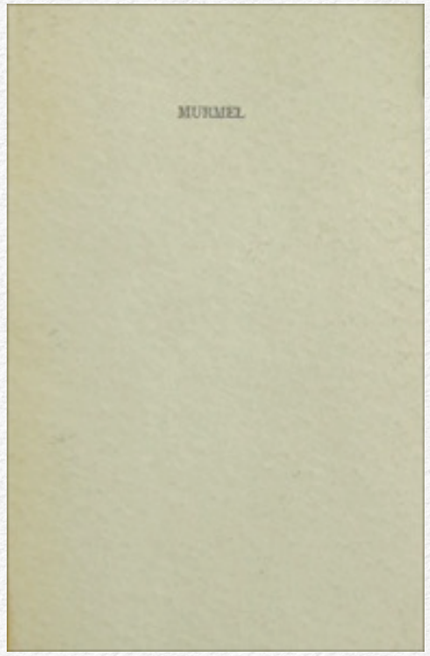
The next day, Sunday, we went on a bus tour of the city and were served a lovely luncheon in an artist space in Kreutzberg where we met our companions. I will address this further in Part 2. That evening we made our first trip to the Volksbuhne Berlin to see Herbert Fritsch’s Murmel Murmel (Mumbling).

Once again I walked in knowing very little about the production other than the fact that “murmel” means “marbles” or “mumble” in German and that these were the only words in the entire play. The show starts with a military band conductor entering from the house and taking a position in the orchestra pit. Soon a sole actor enters and the conductor cues him to begin saying “murmel” over and over again in varying rhythms and intonations. He is joined by another actor and, gradually over the course of ten or twenty minutes, they are joined onstage by an actress and another until finally the entire ensemble of eleven is onstage. They are costumed in the trim suits and minidresses of early-60′s Mad Men kitsch, the set a candy colored cube of curtains moving in slapstick rhythms. The choreography is oversized and hysterical, bordering on camp. Over the course of 80 minutes or so, the ensemble use the word “murmel” as the base of a nonsense language from which to build short, comic scenes of physical theater, playing with status, incongruity and pathos in jump-cut time, like a dadaist Laugh-In.

The first act is set in this farcical Sixties world and explores language. The second act is set in a goofily abstract “performance art” environment reminiscent of the old Saturday Night Live sketch “Sprockets” meant to satirize dance or perhaps eurythmics. The third act begins with ensemble members in a line at the foot of the stage playing melodicas (mostly poorly) and riffing on the idea of music. So I sat through an absurdist physical theater piece performed in three acts over the course of 80 minutes without an interval and with only a single nonsense word repeated over and over again. After about 20 minutes I was no longer amused and the entire project seemed like an exercise in frivolity. It was a funny sketch of an idea, a clever conceit, but certainly insufficient to sustain more than an hour of attention and interest. I left the theater cranky and disappointed.

However, the next morning Mr. Fritsch and his incisively intellectual dramaturge Ms. Sabrina Zwach joined us for the symposium to shed light on what we had seen. It is interesting to note how much context can change our appreciation of any given work of art.

What we didn’t know going into Murmel, Murmel the night before was that Fritsch was actually staging an unstageable “play” by the Fluxus-associated artist Dieter Roth.



Dieter Roth’s “Murmel”

Published in 1974 as an art object book of concrete poetry, Roth's *Murmel* was proposed as the most boring play imaginable and, from what I gather, was meant to be unstageable. The text is arranged visually on the page as a play script with characters, stage directions, pagination, scenes and acts, but all using the single word "murmel". Apparently a colleague of Roth's staged the piece sometime in the 80s and Roth so hated the production that he severed the friendship. But (as I understand it) Fritsch met Roth in the 90s, making him a deathbed promise to stage it again. Daunted, Fritsch avoided the project until now, when Zwach finally convinced him to take it on.

Fritsch, a former actor, works more collaboratively than one might expect from a German director, and the early improvisatory creative process with the ensemble led to rather dark and dour outcomes. Finally Fritsch, known for his brightly colored and outlandish visual aesthetic and an entertainment-oriented sensibility, decided that if the project was doomed to fail, it would fail big. In come the teased hair, crazy costumes and swinging music; the slapstick, physical theater and references to Jacques Tati's *Playtime*.

But the piece gets even more interesting when we start to consider the set. Developing the work in an old theater, Fritsch encounters the stage drapery of an earlier era – the teasers and tormentors, legs and borders that frame the stage, sometimes moved to indicate scenic transitions or direct the audience's focus. Both director and scenic designer, Fritsch begins to play with these stage elements until they come together as a character. Fritsch uses the brightly colored panels as both frame for the action and actor. They change shape, move in and out in slapstick cadences, they shrink the playing space to a cramped cube or withdraw completely into the wings, leaving only stark whiteness (as I recall).

Murmel, Murmel actually becomes much more interesting when we consider it as a time-based art object rather than a work of theater. As theater it is unsatisfying because the conceptual depth of the physical investigation is so limited. In comparing this shallow physicality to the visceral and sometimes terrifying extreme *bouffon* of The Red Bastard who begins with familiar tropes of clowning and physical theater and pushes the audience far beyond their comfort zone. As theater *Murmel, Murmel* feels slight and facile, but viewed as a time-based expression of Dieter Roth's text-based art object it becomes a nuanced and thoughtful work of choreography, a tightly wound living clockwork sculpture of light, sound, objects and embodied motion expressed in mutable space over fixed time. We can begin to see Fritsch's re-framing of the theatrical space as calling attention simultaneously to its performativity and its plasticity, his frequent disregard for the fourth wall undermining the tacit assumptions the space implies. The actors, relegated to one word of text, force us to confront the insufficiency of language and narrative to accurately convey meaning, thus turning the entire theater space itself into a white cube, a nonsensical immersive multimedia art installation. Or perhaps not.

Fritsch's profile on the Goethe-Institut website, written by Christine Wahl, says:

> *'Ultraconceptualised political theatre that has been mediated and remediated over and over again does not interest me,' he proclaims repeatedly from podiums with an air of grandeur. 'The fundamental driving force of theatre is entertainment, even when it is telling a sad story!'*

And:

> *…there are also less successful Fritsch productions, from which it is evident that the director's methodology is not risk-free. This is noticeable when the staging lacks what could be called substructure and – instead of translating the internal deformations of their characters into specific, extreme external actions – the actors seem to rummage through a dressing-up trunk of the protruding tongues, rolling eyes and infantile stumbling that are so common in Fritsch's theatre to pick out and quickly slip into the appropriate mannerism for each scene. When this happens, the audience is not offered a compelling externalisation of internal processes, but standardised comedy routines delivered with total detachment.*

I don't imagine we will ever learn for certain whether *Murmel, Murmel* is a brilliant work of conceptual art or a slight work of slapstick physical theater. But having been made aware of the starting point for the work made me rethink the experience of seeing it.



A scene from "Jeder Stirbt Fur Sich Allein"

Monday evening we went to see Luk Perceval's *Jeder Stirbt Fur Sich Allein*, a staged adaptation of the Hans Fallada novel *Everyone Dies Alone*, produced by Hamburg's Thalia Theater and presented at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. Clocking in at four hours and twenty minutes, *Everyone Dies Alone* set the bar for sheer duration of epic German state theater on this trip, exceeded only by the production of Sebastian Hartmann's *Krieg Und Frieden* that clocked in at a little over five hours. But *Krieg Und Frieden* was worth it (more on that later) while *Everyone Dies Alone* felt like a cruel exercise in obviousness and tedium.

Hans Fallada was a moderately successful German author prior to World War II who remained in the country throughout the Nazi era. While the details of his life seem to be in some dispute, it appears that he was ambivalent about his resistance to the regime, falling in and out of favor with the Nazis at different times and winning praise from master propagandist Joseph Goebbels for his novel *Wolf unter Wölfen* (*Wolf Among Wolves*). This interest subsequently led Goebbels to commission a pro-Nazi novel: *Der eiserne Gustav* (*Iron Gustav*).

Fallada subsequently fell out of favor again, was committed to a mental institution and released in the last days of the Nazi regime, destitute, broken and drug addicted. Written over 24 days in a morphine haze, *Every Man Dies Alone* is "an anti-fascist novel based on the true story of a German couple, Otto and Elise Hampel, who were executed for producing and distributing anti-fascist material in Berlin during the war." (Wikipedia). Fallada died nearly penniless and mostly obscure just days before it was published in 1947, the first anti-Nazi novel to be published in Germany after the war. Well-received and regarded in Germany, it was less well known outside the country.

Published in the U.S. by Melville House in 2009 as *Every Man Dies Alone,* Fallada's novel won significant international acclaim. NPR's John Powers said, "this story of ordinary resistance to Nazism is at once a riveting page turner and a memorable portrait of wartime Berlin," and Primo Levi is quoted as saying it is "The greatest book ever written about German resistance to the Nazis."

Director Luk Perceval, under the misapprehension that *Every Man Dies Alone* continued to be well-known and much-discussed in the UK and USA, apparently felt that the story had wider resonance and merited a stage interpretation. One can imagine that, given the subject matter and Fallada's complicated history, a German audience would find the material compelling and there is no doubt that the story strikes at the very core conflict of contemporary German identity. From what I understand the production received excellent reviews in the German press, but I was decidedly underwhelmed.

My thoughts on being a Jew visiting Germany for the first time are too many and too complex to be articulated here briefly; I will meditate more expansively on this in a subsequent essay. But Perceval's *Every Man Dies Alone* disappointed me on two distinct levels, the first and foremost that it was shallow, facile theater.

When I was at Northwestern University in the late 1980s the performance studies program was jokingly called The Department of Reading Out Loud. From Frank Galati to Paul Edwards to Mary Zimmerman (who was a grad student at the time), there was no shortage of staged adaptations of literature. By 2013 the presentational staging of literary works is familiar and well-worn territory, though it remains difficult to do well. Elevator Repair Service achieved a genre-defining moment with Gatz and nobody, including ERS, has done anything to rival it since.

Perceval's *Every Man Dies Alone* did nothing to improve or innovate the form. Using the most familiar and obvious staging techniques, and working from what seemed to be a turgid and largely unedited script, the play most accurately resembled the experience of reading a homework assignment the night before an exam. If I wanted to read a novel, I would read a novel.

Complete with actors shouting their lines with an inflated sense of self-importance, Perceval – who is not German, but Belgian – delivered a production that reinforced the worst stereotypes of German theater with none of its many merits. The overarching aesthetic impact was one of being clubbed repeatedly over the head with a blunt object. Had the production been in English it would not have been out of place as a thesis project at the graduate directing program of an elite American university or as the pet project of the Artistic Director of a well-funded American regional theater. This is not a compliment.

Having been honored with an invitation to Theatertreffen to see the most remarkable theater from German stages of the past year, having seen Thalheimer's powerful staging of *Medea* and Fritsch's flawed but extravagantly daring experiment *Murmel, Murmel*, I was deeply disappointed. I had been repeatedly informed of Perceval's talent and imagination as a director, but here it was not in evidence.

My second objection to the piece is one that I have about much Nazi-themed art in general. There is no need for me to recapitulate Arendt and Adorno, but if we think we can convey the scope of the Nazi horror through comprehensible narratives, we are *de facto* reducing the collective hypnosis of an entire nation through psychic terror on a mythological scale to a single person's inadequate moral struggle.

Even within the limits of conventional narrative, *Every Man Dies Alone* is the *opposite* of insightful. It is psychically comforting, even palliative, to see a story of resistance, no matter how futile. Through empathy with the lead characters, this narrative reinforces the desire of the individual spectator to imagine that he would have behaved differently, that he too would have struggled to maintain a shred of moral outrage and resistance in the face of evil. But it is an indulgent fantasy since most people did not, or would not, or could not resist the Nazi government.

It seems to me, now, after this long and bloody 20th Century and its international legacy of genocide, the more pressing concern is not to retrospectively reaffirm our belief in individual acts of meaningless resistance but rather to undertake a rigorous examination of complicity. In this extraordinary global moment of political and economic transition, how do we as individuals, and collectively as a society, succumb to group-think? How do we, in the name of homeland security and economic stability, incrementally give up our civil rights and individual liberties until we are living in a fascist sea of amoral brutality and genocide? How are we enticed or compelled to incrementally abandon our humanity and become complicit in acts of barbarity and senseless destruction? Germany inherits a difficult but essential position of responsibility in leading that conversation.

Perceval's production of *Every Man Dies Alone* doesn't tackle these questions, which is not his fault but the text's. Perceval's fault lies in choosing to stage the work in a manner faithful to the original source without truly investigating the contemporary implications and resonance of the novel. That instinct, and the rather facile notion that love is, somehow, redemptive in the face of fascism and genocide, is as much a capitulation to the quotidian as Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* and in that capitulation failed to live up to the epic demands of the subject and the intellectual rigor of the German stage.



Poster at Brecht-Weigel Memorial House

Tuesday morning we had another symposium at the hotel followed by a lovely lunch hosted by The Federal Foreign Office's Division of Interregional Cultural Projects, The Arts. After lunch we split up into two groups. My group took a field trip to the Brecht-Weigel Memorial, informally known as Bertie's House. (Just kidding, it was the home of Bertolt Brecht and his wife Helene Weigel.) After Helene's death in 1953 the home was preserved exactly as she left it, and Brecht's books and belongings are placed in such a way as to suggest he has just stepped out for a walk or a drive. It is quite nice and the tour guide was very energetic and informative.

Having a few hours to spare between our visit to the Brecht-Weigel Memorial and that evening's performance, Meiyin and I took a short tourist-y boat trip on the Spree followed by a visit to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was very moving, and a quick visit to the Brandenburg Gate. Sometimes it is nice just to be a tourist.



The cast of "Odipus Stadt" running up the half pipe.

Finally we ended up at The Deutsches Theater Berlin for Stephan Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt*. If Constanze Becker was the center of Thalheimer's *Medea*, then Susanne Wolff was the vital, beating heart of Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt*. The production linked Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and some selections from Euripides to create a chronological epic of the downfall of Thebes. The resulting story was, surprisingly, a telling of Creon's reluctant rise to power and subsequent fall, emerging from Oedipus' shadow only to be crushed by the effort of purging Thebes of Oedipus' tainted legacy. It seemed to have special resonance given the controversy around the burial of Tamerlan Tsarvaev occurring back home.



Susanne Wolff as Kreon in "Odipus Stadt"

In Kimmig's production Creon is played by the charismatic Susanne Wolff, her lean, defined musculature swathed in black, her raven tresses slicked severely back, while the other actors are dressed in neutral beiges and earth tones, be-skirted regardless of gender, differentiated only by small accents of costume and accessories. The set was reminiscent of a skateboarder's half pipe as designed by Ikea – blonde wood on an incline, curving up the back wall of a spare, white stage.

By both talent and design Wolff offers an extraordinary performance, bringing the character of Creon into previously unseen clarity. Even as Oedipus proceeds to set his own tragic fate in motion, Creon is present, the embodiment of the Guardian of The State. The King is a Thing, but the State existed before and will exist after. We see Creon forced by circumstances (and then by desire) to move from civil servant to King, and the toll his unleashed ambition takes on his conscience and sense of moral certainty.

Wolff had two particularly striking moments as Creon in *Ödipus Stadt*: first when alone, trying on the crown and imagining himself King. Like Prince Hal at Henry IV's bedside, Creon is weighing both the opportunity and the burden of being King. Wolff,

a deft and agile performer, tries on dispositions, demeanors and tones in rapid fire sequence creating a scene that is at once humorous and fraught. Her second extraordinary display of masterful acting was a slow procession across stage bearing the dead body of Creon's son Haemon. This moment brilliantly complicates Wolff's heretofore gender-neutral presentation of Creon; she is at once masculine guardian of order in the *polis* and mother bereft at the loss of her only and much-loved son.

These sorts of complications and nuances run throughout the production and, once again, my pre-show trepidation turned to engagement and admiration as the familiar characters of *Ödipus Stadt* set out inexorably on their tragic journey, no less horrible for being familiar.

After Kimmig's *Ödipus Stadt* I began to appreciate the German model. While it is not the *only* model for producing theater of scale, it has its advantages. There have been numerous times over the years in NYC where I have seen a director's original work and then seen them take on a classic only to be more impressed and satisfied with their work on the classic. There seems to be something about approaching the well-known and familiar that is liberating, that allows the director to focus more purely on creating the *gestalt* of the play without getting distracted by irrelevancies, getting mired in debates with living playwrights or arguments with self-important actors. The conceptual structure of Director's theater and its associated aesthetic conditions and frameworks support a level of investigation and ambition that is unlikely to be supported in any other context.

That being said, the system is not without its flaws. Wednesday morning the dramaturge for *Ödipus Stadt*, Mr. John von Düffel, arrived at our symposium to answer our questions. Most of the feedback was positive, but one of our colleagues from Greece pointed out that it was dramaturgically unsound to mix Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides together in one presentation without at least calling attention to it in some way. Each writer represents a different moment in Athenian democracy; their styles, themes and resonance were distinctly different than each other.

This raises more questions than can be addressed here, both in terms of this specific production and the larger issues about the aesthetic assumptions of German State Theater. The clarity and stability of the structures supporting the State Theater system allow directors to undertake ambitious projects that one might not imagine realizing elsewhere. At the same time, the thinking that undergirds this structure reinforces an adherence to order, a rigidity of process and fixity of construct that resists innovation. To the outside observer the State Theater system contains a pervasive but unrecognized blindness to the nuances of cultural difference and all that implies, thus inhibiting a rigorous interrogation of context. But more on that in the next essay.



Participants in Rimini Protokoll's "Remote Berlin"

Late afternoon Wednesday our group was invited to participate in Rimini Protokoll's *Remote Berlin*, presented by the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) Theater. *Remote Berlin* is the local iteration of Rimini Protokoll's ongoing project, *Remote X*, a site-responsive audio walking tour that is adapted to each city where it is presented. Each person is given a headset and receiver and the group sets out guided by a disembodied voice. I'm not sure how it works technically, but the group has a "minder" who seemed to have some kind of transmitter in her backpack. If one began to lose the signal, moving closer to the "minder" strengthened it. It was unclear whether this person was also controlling the pace and sequence of playback or just serving as a kind of radio tower, but the narrative soundscape itself did seem to be somewhat adaptive.

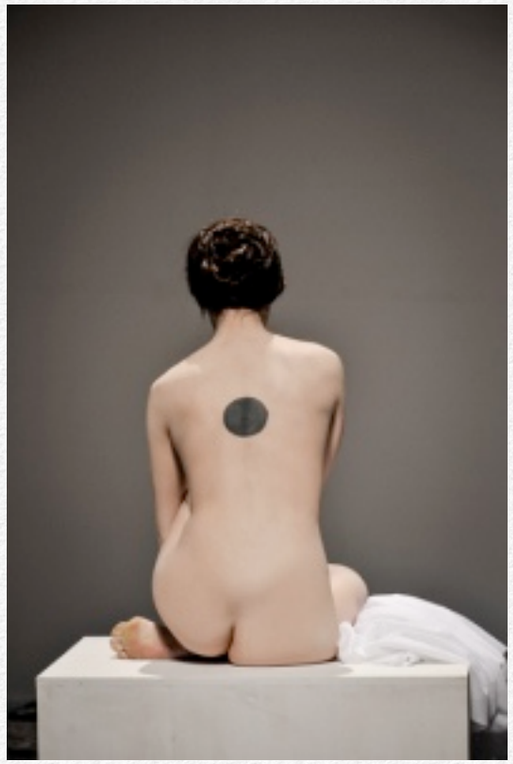
The concept was that this disembodied voice is an entity created by the technology of Artificial Intelligence and the narration served to frame the experience of every day life by calling attention to our interaction with, and dependence on, machines.

The creator, Stefan Kaegi, used a computer-generated language program that constructed the sentences from phonemes taken from multiple sources. The narrative played with ideas of group-think and behavior, swarms, flocks and hordes, the omnipresence of technology, the varieties of experience in the urban landscape and moments of dissonance between interiority and exteriority.

Immediately upon completing the experience I was quite taken with it. Audio tours have been something of a trend the past few years and I enjoyed *Remote Berlin*'s writing, the light humor and the casually profound insights into the cityscape. But upon further reflection, though I still am favorably inclined towards the piece, I began to feel that it was perhaps less insightful than it could have been. I had a very striking personal moment when we stopped at a crosswalk, heeding the instructions of the "Walk/Don't Walk" sign where I was encouraged to reflect on our tacit agreement to abide by these signs. Kaegi's text, as I recall, framed this interaction as man/machine, but I thought about it differently, about the delicate balance between willing participation in the unspoken social contracts that underpin law and order versus the submission to the unmitigated power of the State that is manifest in every street sign giving orders and reinforcing normative behavior. Where, I thought, is the line between responsible citizenship and passive complicity?

Even later I wondered what *Remote X* would be like in different cities, how precisely it would be tailored to the history, culture and aesthetics of a specific city. Remote Berlin did not feel particularly tailored to Berlin except in the most surface-y ways. But Berlin, Tokyo, Paris, New York, Moscow, London, Sarajevo – every city in the world has a profoundly different history and street life, a different feel, a different set of conditions. What is visible and invisible, what is the nature of presence and absence in the urban environment? Which cities destroy their physical history and which preserve it? For that matter, the movement of population between city and countryside has fluctuated over time and the meaning and purpose of the city has been subject to change. How does this audio tour draw us into this kind of fundamental reconsideration of place? I found myself retroactively wishing the narrative had gone deeper and been more challenging. That being said, the narrative as I experienced it did provoke these thoughts in me, so perhaps that is what it intended to do all along.

After completing *Remote Berlin* a few of us raced over to the Schaubühne to see Romeo Castellucci's *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist*, a new work presented as part of the Festival Internationale Neue Dramatik (or, F.I.N.D.) After seeing On The Concept of the Face… at Montclair earlier this year I wasn't quite sure I was in the mood for Castellucci, but I found myself quite engaged and appreciative of this new work.



An early stage image from Castellucci's "Hyperion"

Castellucci takes his inspiration from the revered German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin's epistolary novel *Hyperion*. The novel is the story of Hyperion, a Greek who joins an uprising against foreign occupiers (perhaps inspired by the Orlov Revolt of 1770). From what I read in the program copy, the brutality and senselessness of the war and the subsequent failure of society to live up to his revolutionary ideals results in Hyperion's disillusionment and bitterness. Here Hyperion may be seen as a

stand-in for Hölderlin himself who, along with Hegel and Schelling, his classmates at Tubingen Seminary, were set ideologically adrift when the French Revolution descended into the Reign of Terror, ultimately to be superseded by Napoleon. Hegel and Schelling went on to develop the school of thought known as German Idealism. And that's about as much as I have been able to figure out thus far.

Going in to *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* I knew almost none of the information cited above beyond the barest outlines and found myself struggling to make sense of it, at first. But when I stopped *trying* to find meaning, the meaning began to reveal itself.

The play opens on a beautifully detailed set of a chic modern apartment. A man picks up his briefcase, puts on a hat and overcoat and leaves the apartment, turning of the lights and firmly closing the door behind him. The audience sits and waits for what must be five minutes when we hear a scuffling and then shouting followed by a tactical assault by a S.W.A.T team of German *polizei*. They batter down the door, leading in bomb sniffing dogs and proceed to destroy the apartment, emptying all the drawers, ripping apart the furniture in search of incriminating evidence. The police move down into the audience and shout at the audience to leave, emptying the theater and forcing all the theatergoers into the street where we wait, without direction, for twenty minutes.

It was fascinating to see how many audience members were already hostile to the play at this point, how angry they were at this disruption of their expectations and how closed they were to the possibility of what might follow. You could hear it – in German, English and a few other languages – the audience was divided between people who were intrigued and looking forward to the next part and those who were, for all intents and purposes, disengaged and alienated, who would return to the theater only grudgingly.

After about twenty minutes we were admitted back into the theater. The stage now looked like a more familiar Castellucci set: a huge white cube with small white objects center stage – a bed, a nightstand, a pedestal. Slides are projected that tell the story of an old injured dog with cataracts that has been cast for tonight's performance. The dog is led onstage and cued to react (looking in different directions, barking) from offstage as nouns appear in large projections on the three walls of the white cube. Eventually the dog is led offstage and a young girl in street clothes led to the stage by a woman, possibly her mother. The girl removes her outer garments until she is clad only in a classical white robe, wearing a garland of gold. She strikes a pose on the white pedestal and proceeds to intone sections of the Hölderlin text in a hushed whisper, heavily miked. She strikes one iconic pose after another, running through the physical vocabulary of Classical statuary.

After a few minutes the young girl is joined onstage by a young woman who eventually replaces the young girl, appearing naked and painted white as she picks up the text. After a certain time she steps down from the pedestal, removes her clothing, cuts her hair and puts on a new costume – a white shirt and loose grey pants, abstract but reminiscent of what one might imagine to be the uniform of a Romantic poet. They young woman is replaced by a middle aged woman and she, in turn, is replaced by a more mature woman, the remarkable Angela Winkler.



Angela Winkler in Castellucci's "Hyperion" © Arno Declair

As I recall, Winkler concludes her speech and thus the mortal life of the individual poet. I didn't take notes but I recall that it was at this point that there was a transition

where the original apartment set was nudged in from the wings, framing the center white cube but never fully intruding. We see the *polizei* on the periphery but they never fully enter the white space. And then time passes – literally. Words projected on the back wall convey the passing of time – 10 minutes, 10 years, a thousand years, millenia, eons, ages and ages until we find ourselves back again in a new white space, smaller than before, closer to the foot of the stage and arrayed differently. Eva Meckbach takes the stage with an ocular microscope and a vibrator, continuing the recitation of Hölderlin's text in front of a massive projection.



Odaliske mit Kamera am Auge und Vibrator am Fuss: Eva Meckbach © Arno Declair

Consistent with the Utopian revolutionary ideals associated with Romanticism, Hölderlin's text laments the roughness of human behavior, its betrayal of the purity of primal nature and the corruption by the world of the unsullied artistic spirit. I don't have access to Castellucci's script but I found a copy of *Hyperion* online and culled a section that Castellucci excerpted for his production:

So I arrived among the Germans. I did not demand much and was prepared to find even less. I came there humbly, like homeless, blind Oedipus to the gates of Athens, where the sacred grove received him; and fair souls came to greet him—

How different my experience!

Barbarians from the remotest past, whom industry and science and even religion have made yet more barbarous, profoundly incapable of any divine emotion, spoiled to the core for the delights of the sacred Graces, offensive to every well-conditioned soul through the whole range from pretense to pettiness, hollow and tuneless, like the shards of a discarded pot—such, my Bellarmin! were my comforters. It is a hard saying, and yet I speak it because it is the truth: I can think of no people more at odds with themselves than the Germans. You see artisans, but no men, thinkers, but no men, priests, but no men, masters and servants, but no men, minors and adults, but no men—is this not like a battlefield on which hacked-off hands and arms and every other member are scattered about, while the lifeblood flows from them to vanish in the sand?

Everyone follows his own trade, you will tell me, and I say the same. Only, he must follow it with his whole soul, must not stifle every power in him that does not precisely accord with his official designation, must not, with this niggardly anxiety, literally and hypocritically be only what he is called; let him be what he is, earnestly, lovingly, then a spirit jives in all that he does; and if he is forced into an occupation in which the spirit may not live, let him cast it off with scorn and learn to plow! But your Germans choose not to go beyond the barest necessities, which is the reason why there is so much botched work among them and so little that is free, that gives any genuine pleasure. Yet that could be overlooked, were not such men of necessity insensitive to what is

beautiful in life, did not the curse of godforsaken unnature everywhere lie upon such a people,—

The dense and formal but extremely passionate writing, provocatively edited to goad the audience, exists in stark contrast to Castellucci's measured, painterly, almost serene presentational aesthetic. Yet both text and form operate in similar ways. The content overtly challenges the audiences by using the words of a revered, iconic German poet to accuse the audience of being pretentious, petty, insensitive barbarians, while the form implicitly rejects the declamatory acting style and, mostly, adherence to classical narratives. The tension between Castellucci's deliberate pacing and the volatile text reinforces the tension he is attempting to create in the audience, which is a wider frame for the tension represented onstage between the "real" world of the apartment and the abstracted poetic world of the ideal.

Castellucci seems to intend that the white cube containing first the dog, then a series of women as Classical statues and the embodied poet, represent idealism and purity of thought; the simple clarity of the naive revolutionary. The aforementioned tension suggests that this Romantic impulse is at once noble and fatally flawed. Castellucci's tableaux unfold at a stately pace employing a filmic visual language to suggest reflective interiority. By partially reintroducing the destroyed apartment into the white space during a transitional moment in the work, he establishes a tension between the ideal and real, he suggests the threat of the unyielding idealist turned ideologue and poses a question about the relationship of the visionary artist to the visionary ideologue. Is the poetic impulse related to the terroristic impulse? Are they alternate manifestations of the same radical desire to change the world? Are they both, in some way, tied to an ageless human desire to escape mere temporality and mortality by linking oneself to the eternal? And when the state crushes the terrorist is it, by extension, crushing the idealist?

I found the production at once challenging and deeply gratifying. On an aesthetic level I was intrigued, as with *Murmel Murmel*, by the possibility of applying a more visual arts-based critical framework to the piece. Of late I have been thinking more deeply about the construction and operation of the performance object as dynamic embodiment expressed in fixed space over time, and in that context *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* was a thought-provoking and intricate model. (See Aleida Assmann's essay "How Long Is the Present? Time Structures in the Theater" and my earlier, preliminary essay on the subject, "Some Thoughts on Attention, Language and Demand").

On a cultural level I was curious to learn more about Holderlin as a writer and his role in German history and ideas. I also wanted to try to understand how this particular production might read to a wider German audience, given what appears to be a longstanding cultural fixation on self-definition that seems to exist in a state of perpetual conflict between pride in a national character predicated on rigor, ideals and industriousness, and the ever-present recent history of those positive qualities taken to their negative, tragic and brutal extremes. But like every experience of my visit to Berlin, each question led to new questions and deeper complexity. I have no doubt that these questions and the pursuit of answers will persist in perpetuity.

My favorable impressions of *Hyperion: Letters of a Terrorist* were not universally shared among my colleagues, and though I cannot read German to gauge the local reaction, I did find a rather dismissive review in the Financial Times of London, and so will infer that I may well have held the minority opinion.

I spent Thursday morning at my leisure, wandering the neighborhood around the hotel and taking in the wonders of the historic and colossal luxury department store KaDeWe located directly across from the majestic Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn Station…that just happens to have been the embarkation point to some of the most notorious concentration camps of the Nazi regime.



KaDeWe (left), Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn Station (right)

That's what it's like to be in Berlin – it fucks with your head. And I haven't yet written about all the amazing, intense, thoughtful colleagues I was talking to every day at the symposium. That'll come later.

I have to admit, at this point of the trip my brain was just about overloaded – so many big ideas, so many big productions, so many thoughts, feelings, experiences – I started to wonder how I was ever going to sort through all of it. And it was in this mindset that I steeled myself for Sebastian Hartmann's *Krieg und Frieden*, presented at the Volksbühne in a production of the Centraltheater Leipzig and Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen.



Napoleon in "Krieg und Frieden"

I knew nothing about the production at all and was prepared for a struggle. Even as I entered the theater I was bracing myself for a heroic act of endurance. At five hours, ten minutes long with two intervals, *Krieg und Frieden* trumped *Everyone Dies Alone* by almost an hour and at 1500 pages under the best of circumstances, Tolstoy trumped Fallada by about 1000 pages. I can be excused for never having read Fallada, but *War and Peace* is a classic, one I certainly should have read by now, one that I imagined all German students reading in high school. There was no chance that I was going to be able to follow this epic staging of a Russian masterpiece, performed in German and translated into English supertitles. After the faithful staged representation and declamatory acting of *Everyone Dies Alone,* I thought I knew what to expect from *War and Peace*. I suppose I should have read the website more closely, which describes the production thusly:

> *Sebastian Hartmann and his cast find an intelligent and original answer to the challenge of Tolstoy's epic work of world literature….*
>
> *This adaptation from Leipzig follows neither the rampant trend for Reader's Digest renditions nor the discursive method of breaking up material in the style of Frank Castorf. Instead of presenting linear plots, it is structured by motifs, condensing recurrent topoi into essential scenes with strong images, and it is only logical that they end up dealing with the ultimate issues. "I", "Death" or "Faith" are appropriately complex titles of some units of meaning from this five-hour performance, which takes place on a highly symbolic, tilting and lifting stage platform…..*



the big, mechanical platform

I started to pay attention before the play even started, when director Hartmann walked onstage to announce that one of the actresses had injured herself the previous evening and was being played by an understudy. He asked us to be supportive of her as she undertook the role. This was curious, I wondered if it was part of the performance or not. It was not, but it may as well have been. As I recall – and I admit my memory is a bit fuzzy – the lights went down and composer/ musician Sascha Ring (aka Apparat) took the stage with his band. (See the Pitchfork review of the soundtrack here.) At the same time the cast, clad in classic Russian costume, took their places in a row of seats below the apron of the stage, facing the audience from the orchestra pit. A familiar gimmick, but beautifully staged. They are the audience, watching the real audience while watching the musicians play moody, atmospheric art rock as if at a 19th century Russian opera. It shouldn't have worked, but somehow it did.

The first scene rapidly gave way to a series of seemingly disconnected fragments of text and movement, little snippets of story that suggested Tolstoy while never cohering. Unsure what to expect I kept waiting for the performance to resolve into a narrative and found myself frustrated. Shouting and overacting, philosophizing, heavy-handed symbolism. I was about to give up but towards the end of the first act the massive mechanical lift that was the centerpiece of the set shifted position – yet again – with the downstage left corner raised like the prow of a ship moving confidently into the unknown, the only certainty being tragedy and death. One of the older actors struck a noble pose and spoke a speech in stately, rigorous tones that seemed to suggest noble resignation to his fate as the captain of a doomed ship. I don't recall the exact text but I remember being very moved by the power of the stage image alone, impressed by the tonal shift from sound and fury to hushed, ominous, resigned dignity.

I came back after the interval and gave myself over to the production. I realized with some relief that there was not going to be a narrative and I could stop looking. There was not going to be a story, or characters in the traditional sense. It was as if the first act dispensed with all the stereotypical surface tropes of Epic German State theater and dove in under the hood saying, "Now that we've got that out of the way, let's see what this baby can really do!"



the massive video screens

Over the course of the next four hours I marveled at this astonishing accomplishment. The sheer scale of the production is enough to humble the most ambitious American director: a custom-designed, fully dynamic, mechanical platform/ lift that is bigger than most stages, huge epic hi-tech video and lighting design, blisteringly loud hi-definition audio, luxurious costumes, rock star musicians, famous actresses. The only thing even comparable to *Krieg und Frieden*'s staging is maybe LePage's colossal set for *Das Rheingold* at The Met. But Wagner is a known quantity and a guaranteed hit, and from what I hear LePage stuck pretty closely to the script on that one. *Krieg und Frieden* is a whole new thing and Hartmann is a relative newcomer. I doubt anyone in the States would sink this much into a guaranteed hit jukebox musical on Broadway, much less a five-hour imagistic multimedia montage remix riff on Tolstoy.

But more even then the technical accomplishment was the theatrical ambition and its realization. Hartmann literally used every single theatrical device you could possibly imagine: direct address, breaking the fourth wall, meta-commentary, audience interaction, you name it. And it shouldn't have worked but somehow it did. More than once I found myself thinking this thing was just going to go completely off the rails into self-indulgent disaster, but somehow Hartmann's sheer willingness to push the form to the edge of complete failure – like pushing an automobile's engine beyond what it has been tested to withstand – made this epic ride a total thrill. And his stellar

team of actors, musicians, designers and technicians managed to more than deliver what was needed.

Krieg und Frieden takes Tolstoy's proposition to create an iconic work of art so epic as to sufficiently engage with the biggest, most perpetually perplexing questions and seemingly intractable problems of human existence and meets the challenge. Using Tolstoy's narrative and characters as raw material, Hartmann constructs an elaborate, interlocking multimedia remix fever dream of a production. Imagine being bed-ridden with the flu with only a copy of *War and Peace*, a CD by The National and a television set stuck on a channel that only shows David Lynch films. Imagine you are robotripping and fitfully shifting between sleep and wake, unable to tell what is real and what is fiction; a hallucination of an epic battle in St. Petersburg blends into a werewolf manually pleasuring a female midget Napoleon.

The final act begins with an extended absurd quasi-Symbolist comic scene with bizarrely costumed characters representing ideas clowning around, it becomes "meta" as it falls apart and they acknowledge that it isn't working. They seem to be referencing both the scene itself and the entire premise of Tolstoy's endeavor to reconcile these issues of war and peace through dialectics. As I recall it's at this point that Heike Makatsch emerges from the ensemble and delivers a monologue in direct address that, basically, explains all the fundamental ideas under the play. It is not unlike the concluding monologue in Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan* but, instead of concluding the play, another actor takes over and asks the audience what they think, and the ensemble talks with the audience for a few minutes.



Heike Makatsch

The whole thing is crazy and over the top and seems destined to fail but somehow it works. To continue the car metaphor, it is as if they gave Hartmann the keys to the Batmobile and, knowing he might not get to drive it again, he wanted to use every possible device available to him. It should be Frankenstein's monster, a shambling patchwork disaster, but somehow the show cohered astonishingly well. The only disappointment was a mostly unnecessary and overly-long concluding video sequence. The visual effect of the projected video in the re-darkened theater was interesting for a few minutes but rapidly became boring. And the production quality of the animation was so far below the aesthetic values of the rest of the show that it looked amateurish in comparison, like an afterthought to be added on, but the budget was already spent elsewhere.

Still, *Krieg und Frieden* was an incredible accomplishment and in relation to other large scale work that I have seen, I would put this on the "greatest hits" shelf alongside Mnouchkine's *Les Éphémères*, Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* and even *Einstein On The Beach*. I'm curious to see what Hartmann can do next.

A scene from "Die Strasse. Die Stadt. Der Uberfall"

Friday morning we had a great seminar with Mr. Hartmann and a conversation with Johan Simons, director and commissioner of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall (The City. The Street. The Attack)* produced by the Münchner Kammerspiele and presented at the Haus der Berliner Festpiele. Simons, probably best known in the States as co-founder of Theatergroep Hollandia, was invited to head the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2010. He comes from outside the German system and, in fact, built much of his work over the years outside the theater

altogether, beginning with the itinerant company Wespetheater in the 1970's and including his site-based work with Hollandia. He brings an anti-authoritarian sensibility to his theater practice that seems to contrast starkly with the structures in which he is currently operating. His approach to acting and actors, to text and performance seem pointedly more Dutch than German and it makes for an interesting aesthetic tension that is, in some ways, evident in *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall.*

In the seminar we learned that Munich has a very fancy shopping boulevard known as Maximilianstraße, where all the luxury retailers are located. According to Wikipidedia shops such as Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel, Escada, Hugo Boss, Gucci, Gianfranco Ferré and Bulgari have increasingly ousted the traditional shops, art galleries and restaurants. Maximilianstraße is where people park their Lamborghinis, Ferraris and other luxury cars as they shop, creating a luxury "see and be seen" bubble. This, we learned, has created some tension in Munich because the introduction of the luxury shops has brought an influx of extremely wealthy Arabs from the oil-producing states. This cultural tension was, perhaps, encapsulated by the 2005 murder of the extravagant Munich fashion designer Rudolph Moshammer by then-25 year-old Iraqi asylum seeker Herisch Ali Abdullah in a dispute over compensation for sexual services provided.



Rudolph Moshammer with Daisy

Nobel-prize winning writer Elfriede Jelinek lives in Munich and Simons approached her to write a play about Maximilianstraße, inspired by the Moshammer murder. The thing about Jelinek's plays is that her method is to write a block of text with almost nothing else and then turn it over to the theater maker to do what they will to stage it. It is totally radical and amazing and also completely dangerous. You can actually read the text of *Die Straße. Die Stadt. Der Überfall* here if you're interested. It's in German.

I was already excited to see a work of Jelinek's and, having learned about Simons' history and background, his artistic perspective and the premise of the production, I was really looking forward to the show. Unfortunately there was one major obstacles to my appreciation of the work: it was in German. Jelinek is an extraordinarily gifted writer and even with the best translation one can only hope to glean a sense of what she is doing. Here, in the theater, trying to read hastily translated supertitles, it was difficult to really get a grasp on what was happening with the text. Simon's staging was visually compelling, the actors were exceptional and the overall effect of watching the work without comprehending the text was interesting if not satisfying. But my persistent inability to understand the text only reinforced how much I was missing.

Secondly, at its root, the show is about the shallowness of materialism and fashion. For some reason the shallowness of fashion resists all critique and pretty much everything I've ever seen that tried to offer a substantial, thoughtful indictment of fashion has failed. I'm not sure why. Maybe it is just too easy a target, too obvious in its engagement with consumerism to support interrogation. The only truly amazing and insightful comment on fashion I can recall ever seeing was Meryl Streep's amazing monologue about cerulean in The Devil Wears Prada



As a result I found myself frustrated with the entire experience. I very much wanted to like it, but couldn't find a way in. I hope at some point in the future to have the opportunity to see other work by Simons and a really excellent production of Jelinek. But this wasn't that opportunity.

After the show I was going to head back to the hotel as I had an early flight back to NYC on Saturday, but I was cajoled into going to a party with a bunch of young theater people in Kreuzberg. It ended up being quite a late night and I shared a cab back to the hotel with my colleague Sinan Al-Azzawi from the Iraqi National Theater in Baghdad, staying up almost until morning talking about our art and our lives and, of course, the costs of war that America started and pulled out of, even as it continues to tear his country apart.

My trip to Berlin concluded as it began, with a profound personal encounter with a different culture, wrestling to connect despite our fraught, violent, complicated histories.

But that personal story will have to wait until the next essay. Stay tuned.

Notes From Berlin (Part II)

I'd been trying to write this second essay for quite a while but kept getting delayed, primarily because I've been so busy planning the rest of my life, but also because it has seemed so daunting. The trip to Berlin was so intellectually and emotionally resonant, almost overwhelming, and I couldn't seem to find a way in. I tried a chronological approach, a thematic approach, but nothing worked. Significantly, it was President Obama's speech about the tragedy of the Trayvon Martin case that helped me connect the dots, that helped me find an intuitive way in, to embrace the contradictions and complexity that resist more formal structures.

In his press briefing President Obama said:

> *You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is that Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and history that – that doesn't go away.*
>
> *There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me.*
>
> *And there are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me, at least before I was a senator. There are very few African-American men who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.*
>
> *And you know, I don't want to exaggerate this, but those sets of experiences inform how the African-American community interprets what happened one night in Florida. And it's inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear.*
>
> *The African-American community is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws, everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws. And that ends up having an impact in terms of how people interpret the case.*

The speech was powerful for many reasons, not least of which is the President of the United States speaking about his personal experience of racism, which was almost unimaginable in and of itself until 2008. But I was most taken by the significance of this idea:

> *I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and history that – that doesn't go away.*

Looking at an issue through a set of experiences and history that doesn't go away was maybe the overriding theme of by entire trip to Berlin, only fully evident in retrospect.

We were sitting at our group's welcome lunch, across from me was my colleague Meiyin Wang from The Public Theater and Michael Waller, a theater professor and director from Newfoundland. North Americans and English speakers, we gravitated towards one another and were lightheartedly bantering about gentrification, rising

rents and lavish German arts funding when I turned to another colleague who was mostly silent.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Sinan Al-Azzawi”, he said.
“And where are you from?”
“Baghdad, Iraq.”

All of a sudden gentrification and rising rents felt like shallow concerns; I hardly knew where to start. What do you say to someone whose country has been devastated by your country in a war you personally opposed but felt powerless to stop? How do you begin any conversation at all?

After our lunch and a lengthy, informal networking session, we took the tour bus back to the Hotel Alsterhof for some rest before the evening’s performance. I ended up sitting next to Nihad Kreševlajkovic from Sarajevo who had just transitioned from the International Theater Festival MESS to become manager of the Sarajevo War Theater.

We kept talking through the entire break as he told me about his work in the theater, his experiences during the war; about the perversity of everyday life in the aftermath of genocide when all sides return to “normalcy”. What is it like when everyone tries to pretend that nothing happened but all of daily life is inevitably seen through a set of experiences and history that doesn’t go away?

He told me of a film he worked on about a Jewish woman who survived Auschwitz, settling in Sarajevo after World War II, marrying a Muslim man and living a quiet, happy life until the war. Nihad related to me her sentiment that, in a way, the war in Sarajevo was worse for her because her neighbors became enemies overnight – it was personal. One day you were chatting idly with a neighbor in line at the bakery, the next day he was coming at you with a knife or gun, eyes gleaming with hatred and homicidal rage. In comparison Auschwitz was institutionalized, systematic, de-personalized – it felt like being inexorably caught up in a killing machine, the hatred and genocidal impulse displaced from the individual to a larger structure.

And this was just my first full day.

In the introduction to Part I of this essay I wrote:

> *Every time I come out from America I feel as if I am waking from a dream. The plane descends, I disembark, proceed through passport control and out into the air of wherever I am; the fog lifts, the curtains part – choose your metaphor. We are so insulated here: by geography, by media, marketing and materialism, by the overwhelming multitude of consumer choices between virtually indistinguishable products and services; by our luxurious distance from the brutality and violence in the world of which we are largely unaware.*

Berlin served as a site for intersecting axes of experience, like a Venn diagram where my personal experience of otherness came into dialogue with my experience of privilege. History, culture, politics and aesthetics collocated here, reminders of essential questions and signposts towards future inquiry.

As much as I’m an American, I’m a Jew and my experience of Germany was inevitably through the lens of the Holocaust: it doesn’t ever go away. How do you explain the experience of growing up Jewish in America in the shadow of the Holocaust, amongst survivors and their children?

One of my earliest memories was asking my father about a book on his nightstand: *While Six Million Died*. “You mean Jews like us?” I asked. “I thought everyone was Jewish!?”

I heard firsthand stories from my paternal grandmother about fleeing the pogroms of Lithuania prior to World War II, trudging across snowy plains and hiding in eviscerated horse carcasses to keep from freezing, barely making it to America alive, just barely avoiding the coming tide. As a child my family watched *The Holocaust*, a TV mini-series starring Meryl Streep, and we sat through all nine and a half hours of *Shoah*.

Even today my parents' upstairs neighbor Mrs. Kranzler will tell you of how she left Berlin after Kristallnacht as a young girl; how her father somehow, miraculously, saved the family by refusing to get on a transport on *Shabbos*, by maybe knowing somebody, by getting that extra day to get the passports to get the hell out, just barely.

The plane lands at Tegel and we deplane via rolling stairway, walking across the tarmac onto waiting shuttle buses that take us to an entryway with this sign above:



The lines at passport control are surprisingly disorganized given the German reputation for orderliness and efficiency; we enter an antechamber crammed with weary, baggage-laden travelers being randomly sorted and directed to stand in one line or another. Fellow travelers disappear through doorways into unseen other rooms where their papers are reviewed by indifferent civil servants who will either wave them through or detain them for reasons unknown. It is at once totally normal and ominously familiar.

We take a taxi to the hotel, but the room isn't ready; we go for a walk to the Flea Market at the S-Bahn Tiergarten. As we wander the rows and rows of booths displaying jumbled heaps of old china, silverware, eyeglasses, shoes, vintage clothing and antique jewelry, I try to refrain from making darkly inappropriate jokes about the imagined provenance of these orphaned possessions.

One day I go for a morning walk and see this:



I turn the corner and find this:



Wittenbergplatz Station

The impressive KaDeWe department store on one side and a vibrant, bustling boulevard of shops on the other; here a sign commemorates the victims of the Nazis who left this station on trains headed to Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Buchenwald, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbruck and Bergen-Belsen.

Because although I cannot see Berlin but through the lens of the Holocaust, I'm not alone in this: Germany, it seems, not only acknowledges but wrestles publicly with the legacy of the Nazi era.

At the same time, they are diligently working to raise the visibility of German culture and values that predate Nazism, as signposts for what Germany is now and hopes to become.

Over the course of the week I began to experience Berlin as if watching a time-lapse movie of biological metamorphosis. I could see what I perceived to be a kind of essential German-ness, one that cohered in the 1700s and subsequently metastasized into Nazism, and now, after almost 70 years of crisis, introspection and commitment, that German-ness is emerging transformed. But as with all things, we never emerge fully new; we always carry with us who we've been.

Meeting colleagues from Iraq, Bosnia, Venezuela, Ukraine, Belarus, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan and so many other places heightened my awareness of being an American. I always hope to convey that America is a complicated place and that not all Americans are as we are portrayed in the media or sometimes appear through the actions or policies of our government. At the same time I wanted to extend the same desire to be expansive and understanding to Germany, despite my deeply embedded prejudices and preconceptions.

We're all looking through a set of experiences and history that doesn't go away.

Time and again when talking to my peers I was reminded of the peculiarities, fragility and insufficiency of language. Trying to talk about art across cultures and languages was constant education and amusement. How do you say that in your language? Are you sure that's what you mean in English? What about if we try French? Spanish? German? Japanese? Arabic?

One morning we are in symposium asking questions of Rimini Protokoll's Stefan Kaegi whose work *Remote Berlin* we had experienced the day prior. Sinan from Iraq raises his hand and says, "I liked it very much. I don't have any question for you but I have a few notes," and everyone in the room who has worked in English-language theater laughs. Sinan is offended: "Did I say something funny?" and the room quiets down, awkwardly ashamed. Afterwards I tell him that in the English-speaking theater world the director "gives notes" to the actors after rehearsal to tell them what they did right but, more frequently, what they did wrong and must fix. To us, Sinan's question sounded funny because it appeared that he was offering unwarranted advice to Kaegi on how to improve his show. The word Sinan was looking for was "comments."

Over a week of collegial conversations I am told that in Ukraine the conservatives speak Russian while the artists and liberals try to preserve Ukrainian. Belarus is losing its language to Russian altogether. I am told that in the German language, sentences end with a verb so you have to know what you're going to say before you start speaking, which is perhaps why they are so methodical and precise? Generalizations persist but in every cliché there's a kernel of truth. Does language inform how we experience the world or is it merely a fragile system of symbols, an attempt to bridge the gap of existentially isolated Selves trying to connect and make meaning with Others?

One day on the bus I asked Meiyin, "What is the word for the study of how one experiences the world?" and from the seat in front of us our new friend Magnús Þór Þorbergsson, Assistant Professor of Theater at The Iceland Academy of The Arts, answered, "You mean phenomenology?"

Phenomenology! Yes! Of course! Oh, *phenomenology*, where have you been all my life?

Rimini Protokoll's *Remote Berlin*, a sound walk, was interesting because of where it located the performance – in the head of the participant. Like Ant Hampton and Tim Etchells's *The Quiet Volume* it might be characterized as phenomenological performance in that it does not modify external material conditions so much as it creates a persistent conceptual frame for the experiencer. Sinan, in his halting English, was trying to say as much.

When I was in college I walked a friend of mine home one night after a concert. It was late; she lived in a slightly sketchy neighborhood and there had been a series of off-campus rapes. As we ascended the stairs to her flat, we paused before the landing and she looked into a window. “Do you see that?” she said, indicating the reflection of her front door in the landing window. Yes. “Every night when I come home I stop here and check that window to see if anyone is waiting in the vestibule by my door. That’s what it’s like to be a woman.”

I had seen countless plays and movies and heard stories about violence against women, about rape. I had attended a Take Back The Night rally. But this was the first time I actually got it. Right, exactly. Looking at an issue through a set of experiences and history that doesn’t go away.

One can imagine performance as a kind of applied phenomenology, an ongoing experiment in intersubjectivity, an attempt to bridge the experience gap through intentional liveness.

In university I studied archetypal and psychological approaches to literature with Dr. Leland Roloff, a white-maned patriarch with sonorous voice and imposing presence. He told many stories and I have no idea which ones were factually true but they all resonated with a greater, cosmic truth.

He told the story of a rural tribe, first introduced to the television. They watched it for a few days and turned it off, leaving it unheeded in a pile of junk. The anthropologist asked, “Why don’t you watch the television? It knows so many more stories than your village storyteller!” And the tribal leader replied, “Yes, but my storyteller knows *me*.” I can still hear Dr Roloff intone in his resonant voice, “Ah, *that* story!”

Dr. Roloff told the story of interviewing graduate school candidates in South Africa in an office with a window and an impressive view of the ocean. He was meeting with a candidate who was very promising but seemed distracted, unfocused and unable to concentrate. Finally he stopped the interview and asked the student what was the matter. The student replied, “I’m sorry but I’m from the interior of the country, I’ve never in my life seen the ocean before.” Ah, *that* story.

One day towards the end of the trip, Sinan shared a YouTube video of the show he had directed in Baghdad and was bringing to Berlin in a few days. The language barrier made it hard to understand at first, but I came to learn that the story of the play was of a prostitute who seeks refuge from a street gun battle in the home of a devout Muslim woman. At first, the woman refuses the prostitute’s request but then relents, and what ensues is a volatile conflict that causes both women to question their identities. Here’s some video, in Arabic:



I will admit that at first I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I couldn’t understand the language, the video was from a workshop and, from my Western perspective, the form was familiar. The Muslim woman, costumed in oversized prayer beads, seemed cartoonish; shouting has never been my favored acting style.

But Sinan narrated the action as we watched, and I began to be drawn in. At the 3:19 mark in the video, you will see the prostitute aggressively clanging finger cymbals in the face of the Muslim woman, who cowers in fear. Sinan told me that Saddam’s secret police used to clang finger cymbals like that when they raped the Iraqi women they had arrested and were torturing. To me, it just looked like a loud fight. To an

audience that lived through the terror of Saddam Hussein's regime, this scene resonated in an entirely different and more horrifying way.

So when we, as artists, encounter work for the first time and when we ourselves make work, do we ask to whom we are speaking, do we think about the spectator, about their experience of this moment? Are we mindful, aware, curious and cognizant of our own biases? Are we receptive to the experience of phenomenological inter-penetrability? When we practice intentional liveness in the creation of works of ephemeral art are we similarly attentive to the construction and contexts of our physical and experiential space? Are we using situation awareness? Or are we being willfully blind to our contexts as we attempt to impose a rigid and unwavering ontological certitude on others?

I thought about Dr. Roloff's stories when our group met Annemie Vanackere, the newly appointed director of the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) theater. We had only been there a short time, and after a cursory overview of the venue she opened up the floor to questions. My colleague Magnús from Iceland asked her what she might be planning to do differently than her predecessor and Ms. Vanackere flew into a rage. "I will not answer this question! If you were a member of the press I would throw you out! Why does everyone ask me this? Would I come to an institution that I thought was broken only to change everything?" She continued on a defensive – and frankly embarrassing – tirade for a good five minutes.

It is understandable, given the role of the institutional director in German theater, that Ms. Vanackere might be defensive, given that she is a Flemish woman taking over a cherished institution that was previously run by a German man. But even so, she reacted as if she had no idea of who we were, or interest in why we were there.

Her interaction with a group of colleagues respectfully gathered to learn from her experience was the veritable embodiment of the stereotype of the haughty European culture snob and demonstrated the conflict between Europe's expressed democratic ideals, its practices and self-image. Even after she calmed herself, she continued to speak as if she had no idea who was in the audience or interest in learning about us. She revealed that she had indeed made changes at the HAU during her first year, and that she hoped to make the HAU more inviting, inclusive, welcoming and transparent—the irony of course being that she was completely unable to be inviting, inclusive, welcoming or transparent in her personal comportment.

When my colleague from Bangalore, Mr. Prakash Belawadi, politely asked Ms. Vanackere what criteria informed her artistic decision-making process, she parroted the Western curator's default bromide, "Well, of course, we all want to support good art."

But this signifier "Good Art" becomes increasingly useless when no-one interrogates what the phrase actually means: what are the qualities and characteristics of "good" art and who determines those qualities, characteristics and aesthetic frameworks? The refusal – or inability – of curators to articulate and justify their qualitative judgements belies the inherent cultural and class biases of existing curatorial practices in performance.

When curators render judgement from on high of what is good and what is bad without explanation or acknowledgement of their own influences, interests and biases, they do both artists and audiences a disservice. This disservice is aggravated exponentially when curators like Ms. Vanackere respond defensively and derisively to innocent, innocuous and sincere questions from sympathetic colleagues.

Our encounter with Ms. Vanackere gave me new perspective on those late nights in New York in January at Under The Radar and Coil, when the European curators gather to drink and debauch, discuss and make deals.

I pictured any one of them – all white, mostly male – looking down from the windows of a luxe Manhattan cocktail lounge at a heterogeneous group of nameless faces from around the non-Western world, brown skinned and possibly of different faiths and wondered what they would see? Would they see these people as colleagues or presumptive upstarts for the uncivilized world, merely inferiors to be either educated or ignored? Perhaps these curators think there is nothing to be learned from other cultures and perspectives, other ways of being in the world?

Americans are constantly reprimanded for our provincialism, but experience suggests that the European curators are collectively often as incurious and self-satisfied as the most provincial American.

Elite curators in both Western Europe and The United States take their cultural authority as a given and as such resist interrogation through an elaborate self-

performance of smoke, mirrors and misdirection. This cultural authority is frequently predicated more on class bias, privilege and the self-affirming echo chamber of an exclusive inner circle than any quantifiable or identifiable merit. They frequently move through the world with imperial arrogance, from festival to festival in an insulated bubble, willfully blind to the conditions in which the rest of the planet operates. At least in the visual arts curators are required to write about their ideas, articulate their artistic choices and then defend them publicly. Not so in performance.

1999 saw the publication of a book called *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* that made a comprehensive and convincing case for an extraordinary range of non-heteronormative behavior among animals. Sexual behavior in the animal kingdom is as diverse, complex and multivalent across all species as it is in *homo sapiens*. Equally fascinating was that this behavior had been observed and described in great detail by zoologists for hundreds of years only to be mischaracterized due to the cultural biases of the scientists. They lived in a world where homosexuality and non-heteronormative practices did not exist or were considered so deviant as to be without precedent in the "natural" world. They saw it, but couldn't *see* it.

This is the panel of judges for Theatertreffen:



Judges for Theatertreffen 2013

And here are the faces of TCG's recent "I Am Theater" campaign:



TCG's "I Am Theater"

Germany – and most of Western Europe for that matter – may aspire to cultural inclusivity but their cultural biases are so deeply rooted as to be invisible to themselves. They see it, but can't *see* it – a condition, I suspect, that underlies many of the problems that arise when the West (including The U.S.) seeks to ""help" or fix" other cultures without actually understanding them.

At a welcome lunch hosted by the Federal Foreign Office, the Division Head made a speech extolling Germany's commitment to the soft power of cultural exchange. I admire and applaud this, and I am a grateful beneficiary of their largesse. The fact that they convened a diverse group of theater practitioners from around the world for a week is, to me anyway, demonstrable proof of the success of this strategy.

At the same time, I couldn't help but be struck by the disconnect between the aspiration and the reality. All of the government officials and functionaries, diplomats

and administrators were white. But the young team assembled by the Goethe Institut to guide our group was a veritable Benetton ad. The team consisted of Boris Abel, Özlem Cosen, Natalija Yefimkina and Moritz Meutzner – all of them excellent, capable, friendly and knowledgeable guides. Over the course of the week we learned that Boris is of mixed German/Cuban origins, Özlem of Turkish descent and Natalija emigrated from Ukraine as a child. Moritz, who was indubitably German, rounded out the team.

I've been in the theater my whole life; I'm not unaware of stagecraft.

Over the course of a week of theatergoing in Berlin I saw no brown, black or yellow faces on stage, no Turks or Arabs or Muslims or living Jews. In our seminars we saw no people of color as artists, directors, dramaturgs, curators, critics or educators.

This isn't really a problem except insofar as we are living in an increasingly diverse and culturally complex world and Germany's noble efforts towards global reconciliation – for that is how I feel compelled to characterize it – require more than stagecraft and beautiful glass government buildings admirably reinforcing core values of transparency and openness. It means actually including diverse voices in the systems of power and civic space.

On one of the rare occasions I wandered away from the group, I struck up a conversation with a local who had immigrated from the Former Soviet Union. He told me about the Turks, the Africans, the Arabs and all the other people from around the world who found themselves settling in Berlin. "But no matter how long we are here, no matter how well we speak German, no matter what we do, we will never really be German. Not in the eyes of the Germans."

And the same could be said of England, France, The Netherlands and most of Western Europe. With national identities predicated on the need for a visible and disenfranchised Other, they are paralyzed when attempting to negotiate difference and engage meaningfully with the unassimilable.

In a meeting with Theatertreffen Festival Director Yvonne Büdenhölzer and Theatertreffen Stückemarkt director Christina Zintl, Ms. Zintl off-handedly remarked that much of the work she was reading, and much of the discourse of the moment, was engaged with the idea of the End of History, with the idea that we are at the twilight of a great era. I have heard this trope frequently from colleagues in Europe.

Later, in conversation with Prakash Belawadi, we both remarked how narrow, shortsighted and self-centered this notion seems. "My country," he said, "has over a billion people and thousands of years of history and we feel as if we are just beginning."

While The United States and Europe share a similar colonial outlook towards the rest of the world, America differs in that it is a nation of people from other places and even now, in these dark times, anyone who comes here (legally, admittedly, though sometimes even illegally) and sticks it out long enough, is an American. We fight about it, sometimes horribly and in ugly tones, but it is all out in the open. Americans – regardless of origin – are nothing if not plain spoken and distrustful of pretense. This can be problematic insofar as it has often led to anti-intellectualism, but it can be helpful when negotiating cultural difference. America is more nuanced and complicated than Europe wants to believe and Americans – regardless of cultural origin – are not stupid; we are not naive, we are not unsophisticated, we are *different*.

I imagine that part of why assimilation has historically been so successful in the United States is the bargain of material comfort and safety. If you come to America you can keep most of your culture, customs and religion and mostly folks will just leave you alone. As long as you opt in to "The American Dream", you're one of us. You may have to adapt just a bit or let go of some of your identity, more likely you'll commodify your identity into an act, using show business as a vehicle for assimilation. But you're one of us. And to this day, despite all the complications, this mostly holds true.

But a similar bargain doesn't exist in Europe. There's no incentive to give up your identity. If you come from some other country or culture to seek a better life, it doesn't matter how much you adapt, they'll never let you in. Ever.

After a week in Berlin that included seeing epic productions of *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *War and Peace* and a Castellucci staging of an epistolary novel by the German Romantic poet Holderlin, I think I began to understand, at least a little bit, the scope of the German imagination and sense of self.

Through engagement with German culture, one can imagine Germany's self-conception as Tragic Hero, as Oedipus, a country whose greatest strengths, in excess, became its tragic flaw. Its sense of order, honor, justice and respect, the German passion for rigorous intellectual inquiry, science and philosophy, the precision of its language and the formal protocols of everyday life are what have allowed it to at once achieve greatness and commit its greatest atrocity.

One can imagine how much German culture must have appealed to the Jewish imagination, the legalistic Talmudic mind, with its endless obsession with categorization and minutiae, with codifying and describing in excruciating detail the protocols of everyday life, the exact parameters of right action. One can imagine the joy and ambition of Germany's Jews upon Emancipation in 1871 – yes, that's right, Germany emancipated its Jews *after* America emancipated its slaves – as they entered an era of freedom and assimilation.

Finally free to live outside their ghettos, finally allowed, legally anyway, to pursue any profession they chose, to be free, at least theoretically, from the constant threat of violence. They flocked to this bright and shining promise of a Germany built on order, philosophy, industry and grand ideas, a Germany at the height of its powers and colonial ambitions, and they contributed to its success.

So one can equally imagine how, in the disorder and chaos after WWI, the German public became alarmed. Amidst the disorienting acceleration and velocity of this new mechanical age, facing an influx of new ideas, values and loose social mores imported from America and Russia, a large swath of Germany's populace felt threatened.

One can imagine how unsettled many German citizens must have felt during the messy, tumultuous democracy of the Weimar Republic and amidst the financial woes that beset the country in the wake of the market crash leading to the Great Depression. One can imagine how the titans of German industry felt threatened as well and how, collectively, they looked at these *arriviste* Jews, newly freed from their filthy ghettos and fouling the streets of the Fatherland, and saw in them an existential threat to the essential German character.

Disoriented, alienated and poverty stricken, the citizens of the German *polis* no doubt sought a hero to restore their rightful place in a new world order, and a nation in ecstasy unleashed an orgy of violence, an intoxicated bacchanal of destruction that rent Europe asunder. And when the fugue subsided and sense returned, Germany looked at what it had done, it gazed down at its bloodied hands and clothing rent asunder, ash-covered, beaten and depleted, and no longer recognized itself.

Our visit to Berlin started with a bus tour, led by the aforementioned and remarkable Boris Abel, who over the course of our stay would reveal himself to be a true Renaissance man and one of the most knowledgeable guides I've ever had the good fortune to meet. Boris left no question unanswered on all topics from German history to art criticism to philosophy, architecture and beyond.

Whether for scheduling geographic or dramaturgical reasons I cannot say, but the first stop on our introductory bus tour of Berlin was The Berlin Wall Memorial and the Topography of Terror Exhibit:



I often gently chide my parents for their obsession with the Holocaust. They are observant Jews and, as I mentioned earlier, the Holocaust has always loomed large in our household. When my mother goes on a tear about IBM's complicity in the Holocaust by providing the Hollerith Punch Card and other state-of-the-art technology to the Nazis, I tend to take it with a grain of salt. When she rails on about how the Nazis funded The Holocaust and the war effort by murdering Jews and stealing their wealth (to the tune of 120 billion Reich marks or over £12 billion at the

time) I just take a deep breath and let it go, because the past is the past and it is time to move on.

In March 2013, Eric Lichtblau published an article in the New York Times titled, "The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking" where he wrote:

> *When the research began in 2000, Dr. Megargee said he expected to find perhaps 7,000 Nazi camps and ghettos, based on postwar estimates. But the numbers kept climbing — first to 11,500, then 20,000, then 30,000, and now 42,500.*
>
> *The numbers astound: 30,000 slave labor camps; 1,150 Jewish ghettos; 980 concentration camps; 1,000 prisoner-of-war camps; 500 brothels filled with sex slaves; and thousands of other camps used for euthanizing the elderly and infirm, performing forced abortions, "Germanizing" prisoners or transporting victims to killing centers.*
>
> *In Berlin alone, researchers have documented some 3,000 camps and so-called Jew houses, while Hamburg held 1,300 sites.*

Walking through the Topography of Terror exhibit I came across a display showing the non-official sites in Berlin where political targets of the Nazis were imprisoned, tortured or killed and where the SS and SA held meetings as of 1933-1934:



Map of Nazi Party Detention Sites in Berlin 1933-1934

I began to feel the true enormity of the Nazi enterprise.

Hitler saw a nation in financial distress with rampant unemployment, a dysfunctional government and a deeply wounded sense of national pride and sensed his opportunity. He employed populist, chauvinistic messaging while aligning himself with corporate interests. In 1933 Hitler used the opportunity of the Reichstag Fire to convince German President Paul von Hindenberg to suspend civil liberties and arrest Hitler's political opponents (The Communists) allowing the Nazi Party to form a majority in Parliament, which led to the passage of The Enabling Act, which essentially ended democracy in Germany and replaced it with a dictatorship.

Hitler needed money to finance his government, so he accelerated his campaign against the Jews as much to expropriate their wealth as to provide jobs, thus reducing unemployment and increasing GDP. Once you have the capital you can embark on the economic development necessary to build a world-class genocidal-industrial complex. The construction of death camps and railway lines creates an increased demand for labor; the manufacture of munitions, planes, tanks, guns and poison gases requires factories, labs and even more workers.

The administration of such an endeavor, given the meticulous documentation and data aggregation demands of the Reich, certainly created even more demand for skilled middle managers and executives.

Reluctantly and to my mounting horror, I began to appreciate the enormous logistical challenges of such an undertaking. In some macabre way, the Nazi apparatus can be seen as one of the greatest triumphs of corporate efficiency in the history of mankind. It can be viewed as a startling testament to effective corporate enterprise disguised as government.

By turning Germany into a dictatorship with Hitler as CEO, the Nazis created a vertically integrated multinational corporation that was constantly acquiring new territories, creating new markets and creating value for its shareholders – the German people. All they had to do was give up all their civil liberties and embrace genocide as a business practice. And who can resist the siren song of a successful business?

I kept staring at that display in the Topography of Terror exhibit, all those red dots like blemishes on the map of Berlin, and I started to ask myself, “How is it possible that a political minority can game the system to achieve and maintain power, to hold a country hostage and transform it? Does it start with disabling the existing system to the point where it appears broken beyond repair and then stepping in? How much groundwork would they need to do?”

And for some reason I started to think about gerrymandering in the United States. There is something called the Redistricting Majority Project which is an initiative of the Republican State Leadership Committee (a 527 Organization that was the 4th largest SuperPAC in the 2010 election cycle) that is dedicated to redistricting. According to their website:

> *At the conclusion of the 2010 national census, congressional seats will be reapportioned to each state. The states with a shrinking population will lose congressional seats and states with a population boom will gain seats. A massive effort to redraw state legislative and congressional lines will take place according to each state’s laws. The party controlling that effort controls the drawing of the maps – shaping the political landscape for the next 10 years. In 38 states, governors and state legislators play a determining role in the redistricting process.*

They self-identify as a grassroots effort, but one imagines they are about as grassroots as The Tea Party, an insidious movement largely funded by Rupert Murdoch and the Koch brothers.

Why does this matter? Because in the wake of the repeal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a host of states including Texas and Florida have hastened to enact laws specifically designed to disenfranchise the poor and people of color. Because it is not merely fanciful to imagine a coalition of ruthless corporations and far right political extremists using sophisticated media strategies to disseminate populist, chauvinistic messages that foment racial animosity and xenophobia, aggravate existing tensions, and create a climate of fear and perpetual war.

In such a climate, one where the economy is weak, employment is low and the government seems broken beyond repair, people might be willing to give up their civil liberties in exchange for the promise of material prosperity and a newly strong country. People might be willing to do unspeakably racist, hateful things to their neighbors in the name of national security and blind patriotism. Just ask Edward Snowden or Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning; ask Lavabit and Silent Circle.

But certainly there is no comparison between the rise of Nazi power in Germany and the rise of the extreme political right in the contemporary United States? Surely this is hyperbolic and unfounded? Perhaps. We are different countries with different heritages and different ways. And this is a different world. But perhaps, at the very least, we can look backwards from the beginning of the 21st Century to the middle of the 20th Century and be instructed by the German experience. Surely 70 years, barely two generations, is not too long ago.

If Germany’s great national atrocity is the Holocaust, America’s is the genocide of the Native Americans and slavery. The Native Americans have been so thoroughly decimated and marginalized there is almost no possible way for the United States to offer meaningful reparations. At best we can try and mitigate the damage and save those that survive.

Slavery, however, is a different story. Gerrymandering and redistricting, the repeal of the Voting Rights Act, the political battles raging today, still being fought along racial lines – all of these are the legacy of slavery.

Where Germany waged war on the world, America waged war on itself, tore itself apart in a Civil War over the moral crisis of slavery.

In Germany, the Jews are noticeable primarily through their absence. After the Holocaust there were almost no Jews left and even today, though Jews are returning, they exist more as historical legacy than living citizenry.



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

On the other hand, African-Americans have continued to be a visible presence in the everyday life of American society. They are in many ways the beating heart of American culture, some of the greatest contributors to our intellectual and creative legacy. And yet they remain outsiders, prejudiced against and disenfranchised.

> *You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is that Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and history that – that doesn't go away.*

Where Germany's path to redemption has been through repentance and restitution to a mostly-absent victim, America's path to redemption is a constant negotiation with an ever-present people, people who are legally equal but to this day, even with an African-American president, must continue to fight for their right to live in a just and equitable society.

The Jews have done remarkably well in America. So well that most of us have forgotten the misery of the Jewish condition until just over a century ago. We have done so well that most of what remains of our cultural memory are the fictional, idealized stories of shtetl life and the memory of the brief flourishing of the Jewish Enlightenment in Western Europe, both destroyed by the The Holocaust. In our comfort we forget the deprivations from whence we came.

In Alan Berliner's moving documentary, *Nobody's Business*, there is a wonderful sequence where he interviews his extended family of cousins, first and second generation immigrants, asking them where the family is from. "Russia? Poland? Berlin?" Nobody actually knows and his father tells him to stop asking, "Why should I care about that?"

This is a picture of my grandfather, Moe, as a young man with his grandfather Shmuel Groynim, taken in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1913, when Shmuel visited America, before returning to Minsk:



My grandfather Moses with his grandfather Shmuel in 1913

imagine a world where the past and the future could so starkly coexist in one family, separated by a single generation?

Prior to Emancipation, Jews in Europe were subject to numerous restrictions including requirements to wear special clothing, to make special oaths of loyalty, and to pay special taxes. They suffered restrictions on their freedom to practice their religion; they were not allowed to vote and were subject to frequent violence. They were confined to ghettos where they were frequently locked in at night, only to have the gates opened during times of civil unrest when rulers would foment pogroms to distract the Christian citizenry.

The word “ghetto” comes from the name of an island near Venice where Jews were forced to reside in the 16th Century. It was originally the site of a foundry for artillery; a dirty, toxic, segregated part of the city where Jews could be kept out of site but still be available when needed. It is the setting for Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* where Shylock memorably declaims:

> *…He hath disgraced me, and*
> *hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses,*
> *mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my*
> *bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine*
> *enemies; and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath*
> *not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,*
> *dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with*
> *the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject*
> *to the same diseases, healed by the same means,*
> *warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as*
> *a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?*
> *If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison*
> *us, do we not die?*

This might well have been risible to an audience that believed Jews to be subhuman agents of the Devil who consumed the blood of Christian babies for Passover and were responsible for the death of Christ.

The Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from Spain in 1492. Norway and Sweden, among others, prohibited the entry of Jews into their borders. They were often not allowed to own property and were prohibited from most trades, except moneylending, as Christian doctrine forbade the charging of interest between Christians. Thus the origin of the European imagination of the wily, usurious, wandering Jew, loyal to no nation, living off the labor of the honest, man of the earth, memorialized in the virulently anti-Semitic Nazi-funded film *Jud Süß* that premiered at the Venice Film Festival, winning the top award and becoming a huge popular hit.



still image from Jud Süß (1940)

After the end of slavery, African-Americans were systematically disenfranchised from voting, property owning, education and many trades. They were forced by violence, economics or circumstance to live physical segregated from the mainstream of society, allowed only to travel to their jobs as servants before returning to their ghettos. One can speculate that the illicit trades practiced in the ghettos – drugs, gambling, prostitution and other vices – are not unlike the Jews’ relegation to moneylending. The black, the Jew – the Other – must take on the sinful earthly tasks associated with commerce and the flesh to enable the white Christian mainstream to maintain the illusion of purity and grace.



Racist Poster for the film "Native Son"

Earlier I mentioned the American bargain of material comfort and safety. If you come to America you can keep most of your identity as long as you opt in to The American Dream. The question of course arises, what is that dream and at what cost? The protagonist of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez, is a young Pakistani in America, a Princeton graduate and rising star at the fictitious financial firm Underwood Samson. In Manila on an assignment, he reflects on the prosperity of Manila relative to Lahore and is disturbed by his response:

> *I tried not to dwell on the comparison; it was one thing to accept that New York was more wealthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well. I felt like a long distance runner who thinks he is not doing too badly until he glances over his shoulder and sees that the fellow who is lapping him is not the leader of the pack, but one of the laggards. Perhaps it was for this reason that I did something in Manila that I had never done before: I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an American. The Filipinos we worked with seemed to look up to my American colleagues, accepting them almost instinctively as members of the officer class of global business – and I wanted my share of that respect as well.*
>
> *So I learned to tell executives my father's age, "I need it now"; I learned to cut to the front of lines with an extraterritorial smile; and I learned to answer, when asked where I was from, what I was from New York.*

Later Changez visits his family in Lahore:

> *I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing…I was saddened to find [our house] in such a state – no, more than saddened, I was shamed. This was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness.*
>
> *But as I reacclimatized and my surroundings once again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence, I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of [that] country's elite.*

On my final night in Berlin, a few of the symposium attendees accompanied our guide Özlem to a party in Kreuzberg. We spent the night socializing with a diverse,

fun group of young, international artists from all over the world. I heard about Ballhaus and Label Noir and other small theaters in Berlin that were wrestling with cultural democracy and representation. I thought about multiculturalism in Europe and America, about race, class, privilege and economics, about Culturebot's Brooklyn Commune Project and what it might take to create actual change in the world. What is it really like and what does it really take to see things from inside another's experience of the world?

Looking at an issue through a set of experiences and history that doesn't go away…

The party was winding down and a small group was heading off for a late night dance party at a legendary Berlin gay bar. I was exhausted and was flying the next day, so I shared a cab back to the hotel with Sinan from Baghdad. We had the kind of conversations that you can only have when you have a had a few drinks, when it is 3AM in a foreign country and you don't know if you'll ever see each other again. I won't recount it in detail here, because I don't know who will read this and I can't possibly know the political implications of our conversation either in Iraq or here in America. But I learned a lot about what it looks like from the inside when America wages war on your country.

We sat on the terrace before retiring for the evening and our conversation wound down. Before we parted ways Sinan pointedly asked me, "Is it true? Is it freedom in America?" "It is," I said, "But it's complicated."

When people refer to The End of History, I ask, "Whose history?"

We look at the world through a set of experiences and history and that informs both how and what we see. The West particularly has long conflated the material for the permanent. The materialist worldview presumes that as geopolitical dominance wanes, so too does political power. It presumes that industrial, mercantile dominance precludes and conquers ideological dominance. But ideas transcend space and time and endure long past the time when all physical evidence has gone to dust.

Greece hasn't been a global power for millennia, but Homer's tales are still told, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle still inform our philosophy, Athenian ideals of democracy persist to this day. The philosophy of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmasutra are alive and well in India and it is said that during the ancient period of Hellenic expansion the Greek and Indian schools of thought were in frequent dialogue. Islamic science and mathematics were once the envy of the world, Islamic scholars invented the decimal system and, in dialogue with the Greeks, refined geometry and algebra.

The world may continually be transformed through commerce, conflict and politics, but humankind's greatest advances have been through the free exchange of knowledge and ideas, independent of the marketplace. Our greatest accomplishments are cultural and intellectual and resist mere materiality.

Looking back at the Rise of the West we can see a great wheel of progress powered by a never-ending river of blood. And all of us in the West – Europe, The United States and the rest – must recover at long last from the delirium of this long 20th century, this bloody era of exploit that began with 19th century Imperialism and ended with 9/11/2001.

Because all of us are accountable in our own way. We can continue on a brutal path of indifference and exploitation or work towards understanding and interdependence. We can embrace the rising world and imbue the future with durable, timeless ideas or we can violently fight the demise of a world that we have only imagined as permanent. Because, per Heraclitus, "Everything changes and nothing remains still. You cannot step twice into the same stream."

Territorial Pissings

When I read Sara Scribner's essay "Generation X Gets Really Old: How do Slackers have a midlife crisis?" on Salon.com, I nearly tore my still luxurious head of curly brown (though admittedly now silver-flecked) hair out of my scalp. "How is it possible," I thought, "that more than twenty years have passed and we're still reading mistaken generalizations and petty simplifications of the people identified as Generation X?" Then I suspected that some trend analyst somewhere must think there's money to be made by stoking the flames of Gen X early-90s nostalgia and Salon.com must be trying to get on that train.

In the Salon.com article Scribner writes:

> *Around the time Richard Linklater's film "Slacker" came out in 1991, journalists and critics put a finger on what they thought was different about the young generation of emerging adults – they were reluctant to grow up, disdainful of earnest action. The stereotype stuck – and it stuck hard. Business school management books define our generation as adaptable but reluctant to make decisions; and boomer managers call on Xers to finally take on leadership roles. Wake up and step up, X! the culture seems to be saying.*

The essay is illustrated by a still photo from the movie *Singles*, directed by notorious Baby Boomer rock romanticist Cameron Crowe, and, in both the headline and final section of her essay, Scribner notes Winona Ryder among the voices of a generation, Ms. Ryder being associated with Gen X most notably as the star of *Reality Bites*, a mediocre Ben Stiller rom-com that was never intended to be a generational statement, or if it was, can hardly be taken seriously. Winona Ryder was never a spokesperson for anything other than perhaps shoplifting while on painkillers. Scribner contrasts the midlife crises of Michael Douglas' character in *Falling Down* with Stiller's character in the recent Noah Baumbach film *Greenberg* and I began to wonder if this was meant to be a critique of Gen X or of media representations of midlife masculinity? I assume Ms. Scribner realizes that she's drawing generational portraits from movies and not real life?

It is useful at this point to note that Scribner attributes her characterization of Gen X as "reluctant to grow up, disdainful of earnest action" to "journalists and critics" and "reluctant to make decisions" or being unable or unwilling to step up and lead to "business school management books". Later in the article Scribner shares that:

> *Xers tend to create sanctuaries that cannot be pierced by fluctuations in the marketplace. Sheryl Connelly, a global trends and future forecaster for Ford Motor Co., says that Xers tend to seek out experiences rather than status symbols. Acquiring flashy cars is for older generations.*

Well, I'm glad that we're relying on the completely disinterested opinion of a global trends forecaster from the Ford Motor Co. to determine the consumer profile characteristics of Gen X!

By relying on generational definitions supplied by media pundits and marketing experts, Scribner capitulates to stereotypes and generalizations that are as misguided and offensive now as they were twenty years ago. Oh, and they're all *wrong*.

An article published on BloombergBusinessweek on September 3, 2013 asserts:

> *…those born between 1965 and 1980 think they're best equipped to manage, according to a new study from Ernst & Young. What's more, baby boomers and millennials agree. Not only were Gen X workers viewed as best at generating revenue and building teams, they were considered least likely to be considered "difficult to work with" or "cynical and condescending."*

> *It's a rare and surprising vote of support for a generation that's used to seeing the spotlight drift to the larger pools of people on either side of it. The EY findings, based on a survey of 1,215 professionals outside the company, found the generation raised on MTV (VIA) scored points for being more inclusive and flexible than its older peers, while having stronger communication skills and vision than Gen Y. As EY partner Karyn Twaronite puts it, they're in a "sweet spot," viewed as young enough to be adept at new technologies but experienced enough to lead.*

The Bloomberg quote is much more representative of my experience than the whiny, midlife malaise described by Scribner and her sources.

And here I'll pause to assert my Gen X *bona fides:*

I went to high school in Baltimore from 1982 – 1986, frequenting a dump called Jules' Loft on Eutaw & Mulberry to see punk bands like JFA, Dead Kennedys and Black Flag; I listened to The Meat Puppets, REM, the Violent Femmes and The Replacements, not to mention all the Brits from Elvis Costello to Stone Roses. In college near Chicago from 1986-1990 I went to house parties where Urge Overkill played in living rooms and saw Soul Asylum play to 10 people in the student union cafeteria. In 1990 I moved to Seattle, sleeping for days at the Federal Building to protest the first Gulf War, seeing Nirvana on Halloween in 1991 at the Paramount with Mudhoney and Bikini Kill; my friend Daniel once bought Kurt, Courtney and Mark Lanegan (from Screaming Trees) a round of drinks at Ernie Steele's on Broadway.



EXPOSURE

Howling for Dollars

In Seattle, the poet who slams the loudest and longest wins.

IT USED TO be versifying was the exclusive preserve of nose-bleeders, bed wetters, cross-dressers, and others who dwelt in the margins of intellectual society. Used to be. Now poetry has a new smell. The faint odor of dust and lavender has been replaced by spilled beer, hoots, hollers, cash prizes, and a waitress who declaims verse while standing on her head and balancing a tray of empty glasses on her Doc Martens.

Welcome to the world of the poetry slam, equal parts punk rock without amplifiers, encounter group without trained therapists, stand-up comedy without chainsaws. And in Seattle, poetry as competitive barroom brawl is vying with rock bands for calendar space at some of the trendiest rock venues. House rules vary at whim. Poets are paired off, perform, receive judges' scores ,and the victor continues on to the next round. Last poet standing takes home the do-re-mi.

Slams began at Chicago's venerable Green Mill, then became popular at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City. About a year ago Paul Grajnert and Hamish Todd began booking readings on Wednesday nights at the Crocodile Café (where Peter Buck hangs his hat when in town), then hit on the notion of running slams on Saturday nights, just before the headliners. That inspired bit of culture shock ran its course; Todd has semiretired from active slamming while Grajnert now MCs at the Emerald Diner. "I'm glad it's still going on," says Todd, "because it provides people with a venue and a place to use their voice, but I would prefer to go back to smoky jazz rooms with sincere poets who aren't looking to get on MTV."

Still: Cash prizes, the roar of an adoring crowd, no need for guitar lessons, free-flowing beer....This could be bigger than grunge. GRANT ALDEN

Hot anguish and cold beer at the Emerald Diner in Seattle.

The Heat

Andy in Spin Magazine (March 1995) doing a reading at the Emerald Diner Poetry Slam in Seattle

I self-published 'zines & chapbooks, I got in the van and toured around, performing at the spoken word tent at Lollapalooza and random bars and cafes from Los Angeles to Vancouver and then all along the Northeast. I went to raves and Crash Worship shows, saw the first-ever Foo Fighters show at the Satyricon in Portland and had a spoken word track on a benefit compilation for Home Alive alongside Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, finally moving to NYC in October 1995 .

After nearly three years of flailing, my HTML skills allowed me to jump on the Internet bandwagon from 1998-2001 when the economy tanked and I earned the dubious distinction of being the first person on the planet to blog 9/11, losing my job in the aftermath. In Spring 2002 I went back to work in the arts at less than 50% of my

advertising salary and ten years later finally returned to my pre-9/11 income, before leaving my full-time job this past August to start my own business (online content & offline experiences) in this terrible economy.

I recount my history in so much detail only because I was there, I experienced it, and I recoil every time I hear this same stupid trope of Gen X's disaffection and indifference. That was not what I saw, that was not what I felt; that was not who I was or who my friends were or are. Just because we didn't – and don't – behave like Baby Boomers, doesn't mean we're ineffective, indifferent or disengaged; we're not even actually very ironic. Baby Boomer David Letterman is ironic, cynical and detached while Gen X-er Louis CK is earnest, bordering on the sentimental. Jon Stewart's humor is not ironic; more accurately it reflects a perpetual disbelief in our elders' obstinacy and the wider culture's persistent dysfunction that is characteristic of Gen X.

The article's final paragraph reveals Salon.com's editorial bias and a persistent, fundamental misunderstanding of the changes that Gen X has been making for the past twenty-plus years. Scribner writes:

> *If we're going to make the country a better place, more suited to our values, we need to do it ourselves. Middle age is, if nothing else, time to shift out of second gear. If we can't take a break from the urban farms, put down the knitting and home brewing equipment, and step into politics, business and other kinds of leadership, we'll deserve our reputation as the generation that never quite showed up. Rather than the sound of silence, we should be hearing our voices – and they should be loud and angry.*

Urban farms, home brewing and knitting are visible gestures at living a values-centered life, one that values individual artisanship and creativity over mass production and slick commercialism, one that prioritizes meaningful interpersonal relationships over facile transactionalism. The current economy is a place Gen X knows well, and all of these cultural "trends" are much more than merely trendy, they are life choices predicated on creating a viable alternative to mass consumer corporate culture. Gen X's life choices propose a more modest and moderate way of living and doing business, a more consensus-driven style of leadership, a desire for a less antagonistic, less oppositional political culture. With any luck the culture of paying heed to loud, angry voices will become a quaint relic of the 20th Century.

From my perspective, much of what is happening today can be seen as a kind of Long Tail of Gen X alternative culture from the early 90s. Whether it is so-called "hipster" culture that prizes craft beer and locavore, sustainable agriculture or the innumerable ways the Internet is changing the way people interact, I see the positive impact of Gen X everywhere. Admittedly I live in a bit of an arts-centric Brooklyn bubble, and it is easy to make fun of "hipsters" – but the signifier is becoming increasingly meaningless as more and more people embrace some of the really fundamental ideas of valuing craft over mass production, artisanship that shows a personal touch, and scalable, manageable, individual entrepreneurialism that allows us to do business with people, not corporations. From The American Maker movement to the proliferation of indie arts spaces and festivals dotting the country, to the cultural shifts around marriage equality, multiculturalism and diversity, I see Gen X as being essential "change agents" – to use douche-y marketing speak – whose chief characteristic is to seek synthesis and cooperation, where previous generations and the dominant culture persist in perpetuating a culture of division and conflict.

The key difference is that back when we were kids you had to actually leave your house to discover new, weird, alternative stuff and meet people of like mind; now you can do it on the Internet. Back then you had to send a SASE for a 'zine and a mix tape, now you can download it and share it instantly. Back then you had to get in the van, now you can do a Google Hangout. So it seems to me that the biggest challenge of the Internet-era DIY moment is re-learning the importance of being together in real life, in small groups of good friends; of remembering that the mediated world distorts and deludes, that it is valuable for distribution but not necessarily for depth.

Which brings me to why the Salon.com article was so upsetting in the first place. Why does the myth of generational likeness and intergenerational difference persist? For that matter, why does the myth of the midlife crisis persist? We all know people of many generations who we like or dislike, who we agree with or disagree with, who

share or reject our values – so when did generational difference become such a powerful framework for supporting a culture of opposition and antagonism? Why would Salon.com solicit an article predicated on the notion of the generation gap and the midlife crisis? I'm going to venture to guess it is money.

We all know people who matured early or late, who came brilliantly into their own or wandered aimlessly in search of themselves, who succeeded early and burned out or kept going into new and better adventures. We all know people of all generations, older and younger, who woke up one day and felt alienated from who they had become, or who woke up one day and realized that they had finally become the person they were meant to be. For every Jon Stewart there's a Paul Ryan, for every Gloria Steinem a Laura Bush, for every business visionary like Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos there's a midlevel account manager at a huge insurance company.

The only thing that really persists across all generations is that there are rich people and poor people, people with access to education and people without, people who will have opportunities and others who won't. And each generation battles, in its way, to determine how equitably or inequitably their society will function. We are at an extraordinary moment now where generational differences on "how" society is meant to function are butting up against cultural differences that transcend generations, and we are collectively failing to change the discourse.

In the case of this article, let's start changing the discourse by proposing that the terms "Generation Gap" and "Midlife Crisis", both popularized during the Golden Age of Mass Media, exist primarily as advertising strategies used to distinguish and target potential consumers for new products. For instance, while some sources suggest that the phrase "Generation Gap" might have been used as early as 1925, the term didn't come into wide usage until the early 1960s, and was about distinguishing "the kids" – who had enormous buying power and influence in the home – from their parents, who also had significant buying power and were very indulgent of their children.

While these ideas are deeply embedded in the Baby Boomer constellation of self-mythologizing narratives popularized in mass media, there is little evidence to suggest that they are objectively true or universally acknowledged conditions of the human life cycle. The widespread acceptance of these ideas as accurate descriptors of life experience is predicated more on their ability to capture the imagination of an influential consumer demographic than on any empirical truth.

The consumer culture of status symbols, competition and an "American Dream" based on acquisitive materialism rather than personal industry and thrift is a product of post-war affluence and the rise of ubiquitous mass media – newspapers, television, radio and film.

There can only be a "generation gap" insofar as we perceive some kind of generational exceptionalism; one can only have a "midlife crisis" insofar as one has unrealistic expectations about what life is "supposed" to be. Scribner is right in this: Gen X, by dint of growing up in the Baby Boomers' wake, had no such delusions.

The Baby Boomers' parents won World War II; the Boomers themselves were born into a world where America was at the height of its power and influence, at its economic peak and confidence and where Mass Media flourished through the advent of widely available and affordable technology. The well-oiled machinery of consumerism produced an endless bounty of goods that was laid for the taking at the feet of the fickle and feckless Boomers. Assured by their parents and society at large of their exceptionalism, their boundless future, their endless possibilities; nurtured by a sound social structure, good schools and Post-war affluence, indulged and coddled by elders who hoped to spare them the suffering of The Depression and World War II, the Boomers never heard the word "No". Success was a right, not a gift, growth inevitable, bigger was always better; the Moon itself was attainable for these children of American Might and Power.

Gen X, on the other hand, grew up in the 70s and 80s, when the Boomers were going through the first of their many so-called "midlife crises". I was a latchkey kid and though I am fortunate that my parents are slightly older and thus remained married, I watched my friends' parents' messy divorces. I have fuzzy memories of James Taylor and Carole King on the hi-fi, macramé owls and herbal tea, clogs and corduroy and hand-stamped leather bracelets, finding someone's dad's copy of *The Joy of Sex* and old Penthouse magazines, the pervasive odor of pot smoke, seeing grown-ups through half-closed doorways deep in confusing conversations as they went from support group to encounter group to therapy and on and on and on. Every season brought a new form of sensitivity awareness or consciousness raising, a new divorce, a new fad, a new self-improvement regimen that would inevitably take them

away from their children in pursuit of their own happiness and gratification, in pursuit of the life they felt they were owed. So these ignored and isolated latchkey children banded together, waiting for Saturday Fathers who never came to ball games and consoling our weeping, overworked single mothers, unsupported and under-equipped and often alone. We were our own proxy parents, raising ourselves.

As the dominant narrative tells it, not entirely inaccurately, when Gen X entered adulthood in the late 80s and early 90s we had already spent our entire lives being ignored by narcissistic, self-involved, entitled and over-privileged Boomers who took their own *droit du seigneur* for granted, who misinterpreted our reticence for timidity. Not to get overly Oedipal, but when you grow up listening to Grown-Ups make extravagant promises they never fulfill while trying to buy your affection with toys and sugared cereal, you learn to be a bit suspicious; when you see the disconnect between what Grown-Ups say and do, when you perceive so clearly in them what they can't see in themselves, when you see that despite all their so-called success and affluence they are still miserable, unhappy, empty people, it gives you pause.

So, theoretically, this disenfranchisement gives rise to Slackers, which creates a Slackers vs. Boomers framework which is, as mentioned before, specious. Boomers – as a whole – comprise an enormous group of people, only a tiny fraction of whom could legitimately be characterized as hippies or counterculture. Gen X, as a whole, is made up of a much less enormous group of people, but still, the group who could legitimately be characterized as "slackers" would be only a tiny fraction of that.

The Slackers vs. Boomers oppositional dynamic is about creating aspirational marketing demographics with which consumers can self-identify. In this case, the Boomer marketers latched onto a "slacker" image that seemed to "capture" a certain zeitgeist. But if one can attribute "slacking" or the delayed onset of adulthood among Gen X to anything, it would be the complete lack of jobs during the terrible economy created by the policies of the Reagan/Bush administrations, a cycle we're seeing repeated now with the so-called millennials. Obama is trying to dig his way out of W.'s mess, but the system is pretty well broken.

Scribner's Salon.com article is a symptom of a media culture that is compelled to stoke generational antagonism – as it stokes xenophobia and all manners of base, reactionary attitudes – in the pursuit of revenue. Legitimate alternatives to mainstream consumer culture are more easily co-opted than confronted, neutered rather than killed. These articles – and the media culture where they are incubated and published – are all just distractions from the real, endemic, systemic problems of our society, problems that demand new frameworks, not the relentless trumpeting of failed "solutions" based on the same assumptions.

Laura Helmuth's recent article on Slate.com explains that life expectancy has doubled in the past 150 years. She writes:

> *We used to live 35 or 40 years on average in the United States, but now we live almost 80. We used to get one life. Now we get two.*

Elsewhere I've read that many of the babies born since 2007 will live past 100! Thus the very idea of a "midlife crisis" is absurd, the idea of a "generation gap" even more so. We live, more than ever, in a constantly moving perpetual now where the only constant is change. I've previously discussed the idea that the programing languages that operate our digital devices and mediated environment are themselves dynamic and existing in a series of ever-changing, iterative and conditional hierarchies. Fixedness, linearity and finality are no longer viable conceptual frameworks for how we experience the world or live our lives, if they ever were.

If there is any useful oppositional, binary framework to be applied across our society, it is to distinguish those who embrace change from those who resist it, those who seek to become thoughtful stewards of an inclusive, equitable culture from those who seek to exploit difference in pursuit of personal profit at the expense of the public good.

It is a remarkable thing that Greatest Generation, Baby Boomer, Gen X and Millennials are all alive at the same time. I go back to this picture of my grandfather Moses as a young man in Greensboro, NC in 1913, standing next to his grandfather Shmuel, visiting from Minsk:



My grandfather Moses with his grandfather Shmuel in 1913

Amazing that such difference can co-exist in one country, in one family, at the same time.

Last week I went to Rosh Hashanah services at my local shul in Greenpoint, one that had been largely abandoned for almost 50 years until they hired a young Orthodox rabbi who happens to be open-minded, thoughtful and inclusive. The synagogue itself is beautiful but old and in disrepair, yet the vitality of the congregation fills the space with a sense of promise. Here was a mix of all generations, from the World War II veteran who has kept the building standing these past 50 years, to the Rabbi's month-old newborn and everything in between. The congregation is multicultural and diverse, everyone at different levels of religious observance as well as economic and life stages, coming together in community, and it was beautiful.

If there's any cultural shift worth noting, one often tied to generational outlook, it is that we are probably no longer in the age of Visibly Great Undertakings. While we are once again called upon to engage with the Big Ideas and Great Questions of the human endeavor, we might want to see that change is achieved incrementally and iteratively over time, that the biggest change in the world starts with the smallest change in the minds and hearts of people, for it is when we come together respectfully to acknowledge difference and seek areas of common ground that real progress is possible.

Martin Luther King – and others before and after him – said that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." Throughout history there have been those who taken the long view and worked towards creating a more just and equitable world based on an abiding conviction in humanist values. And there have been those who take a short view, who value material gain, unfair competition and disinterest in the welfare of others. That is the opposition that transcends generations. Thus it is only when we act in the world with compassion, patience and understanding that we open up to possibility. And now, more than ever, this is what we must do. Because things in this country – in the world at large – are broken, and every human being now living is called upon to grow up, take responsibility and work assiduously to put things back together. We are so much more than we have given ourselves credit for, and yet we perpetually settle for so much less. Let's aspire for a better world, let's open our gaze in time beyond the limits of generations and into millennia, looking back on how we came to this place and forward on who we might become and embark on this grand journey, together.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu, may you have a sweet and happy New Year and may you be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Being There

> *oh my god! I'm NOT kidding!!!!*
> *A plane just ran into the World Trade Center!!!*

Those are the first words of the blog post I wrote from my office on the 21st floor of the Woolworth Building at 9:20AM on September 11, 2001. I was working as an interactive producer at the NYC office of Fallon Worldwide and my desk had a spectacular, unobstructed view of the World Trade Center's North Tower. It was a beautiful sunny day with a bright blue sky, I had spent the preceding weekend at the beach trying to stretch out the summer. The economy was cratering and we knew the end of the dotcom bubble was upon us, but still I felt secure in my job. I was rested and relaxed, ready to get back to work. I sat down at my desk and reached down to turn on my computer, when I heard a loud bang and looked up to see a gaping hole in the World Trade Center out of which flames and smoke were spewing.

It has been over a decade since that morning and sometimes in September, when the sky is clear blue and the weather just so, the images come back and I find myself weeping. You'd be surprised by the details you can see – or think you can see – from that distance: the look on someone's face the moment she chooses to let go of the side of a building and just fall, bodies silhouetted by clouds like black rain; countless reams of white paper glittering in the sky, the incomprehensibly gentle arc of a jet plane navigating into a building and the unimaginable eternity of the microsecond lag between seeing the impact and hearing the explosion. And again, bodies in free-fall, clutching at sky; office paper drifting like horrible snow and later, from the street below, the thunderous clack-clack-clack of more than one hundred floors falling onto each other like dominoes, a skyscraper flattening like a Chinese lantern and vanishing, in a billow of flame, smoke and debris that blots out the sky. Darkness, a moment of silence, then shouting, panic and chaos.

Mostly I just try not to think about that day, but it comes back at unexpected times and in all kinds of unexpected ways. That 9/11 changed my life is no surprise, 9/11 changed the world; what surprises is that while my stress and trauma ebb and flow over time, my determination to find hope in the wake of tragedy persists.

As far as I know, I was the first person to blog an eyewitness account of 9/11. Before that day the blogging community in NYC was relatively insular, small and close-knit. There were several different subgroups of bloggers around the city and they occasionally overlapped, but it was still a niche interest, none of us fully anticipated what blogging would soon become. We would gather regularly for drinks and social outings, our online lives reflecting and intersecting with our in-person lives. It felt small, intimate, personal. But in the hours, days and weeks following the attacks I was astonished by the outpouring of sympathy I received from around the world by people who had read my blog and those of my friends.

Back then, the commenting system I used was remotely hosted, I have no idea if those comments still exist somewhere, but people from all over the planet shared with me their thoughts, feelings and sympathy. Slowly I began to realize that this was the first time in history where a first person eyewitness account of a world-changing historical event was available to the entire rest of the world in real time. It is hard to explain what that felt like.

I'm predisposed, I suppose, to feel-good humanitarianism, and I would retroactively describe it as a feeling of expansive and encompassing empathy. For this brief moment in time it felt like I was immediately and personally connected to people from around the world I had never met and would never meet. It seemed that we felt called upon to show up for each other; to bring our best, most compassionate selves to the table, to be there for each other in this moment of unspeakable trauma and loss. Through the destruction and brutality I felt a glimmer or hope and possibility. The psychic shock of unanticipated violence on such an enormous scale created a kind of rupture in time, a dislocation of the un-interrogated assumptions of social behavior. We found ourselves in a world that was at once all-too-familiar and completely unknown.

Even in NYC, this notoriously prickly city, people were open in ways that one would never have imagined, strangers started conversations with strangers, helped each other in ways both prosaic and profound. One never knew whether the person you were talking to had been at Ground Zero, had lost a loved one, or was merely traumatized along with the rest of us. We were gentle with each other, prudent,

circumspect. For a brief moment, there was an indication of what might be possible if we figure out how to be in the world differently, to treat each other differently.

I lost my job in December of that year and my relationship fell apart in February 2002. In March I watched the Naudet Brothers' documentary *9/11* on CBS and froze in disbelief when I saw myself on the television, running from the dust cloud of the falling building, eyes wide with terror. I spent the winter traumatized and depressed, broke and alone. My friend Scott, in much the same condition, convinced me to take a trip to San Francisco to meet some bloggers we'd befriended and visit some of my old college pals.

That trip was the first time I realized how far away I'd gone. I was riding the bus when I overheard these self-righteous politically correct whitey-do-right-y Bay Area types talking to each other about 9/11, talking "chickens come home to roost" or conspiracy theories or some such nonsense and I got so enraged I had to leave the bus. Maybe, maybe, maybe, okay I can understand, intellectually, the chickens, etc. I suppose everyone is entitled to an opinion, but not everyone owns it in the same way. If you weren't *there*, if you didn't see it, hear it, smell it or feel the earth tremble beneath your feet and the sky close in above your head, then you don't really know. Being there makes a difference.

When I got back from SF I found two job opportunities waiting for me, one was managing an integrated customer relationship management program for Seagram's liquors. The pay was good but I'd have to move to Connecticut – and I'd have to hawk booze for a living. The other was a marketing director position at Performance Space 122. The pay was pathetic, but I'd be working in the arts. Maybe it was the PTSD that skewed my judgment, but I chose the arts gig.

Soon after starting at PS122 in the spring of 2002 I began planning what would eventually become Culturebot.org. I wanted to bring blogging to the arts.

One of the things that had gotten me through the aftermath of 9/11 was a community of bloggers that functioned as both support system and social network. Even before 9/11, blogging had provided a platform to connect people that shared interests, values and sensibilities, people that might never meet otherwise. But after 9/11, especially in NYC, blogging seemed to pull people together.

Because it took at least a little bit of technical knowledge and effort to publish, there was a certain amount of self-selection involved, and because you met people and grew through cooperation and sharing, there was an incentive to write thoughtfully and constructively, to keep the flame wars and ad hominem attacks to a minimum.

From that small group of friends and its spirit of supportive community came the first-ever all-blogger reading and performance series. My friend Chris Hampton had the idea to put on an anti-Valentine's Day reading and in February 2004 Performance Space 122 hosted the very first edition of The WYSIWYG Talent Show. With some promotion from the newly launched Gothamist.com we attracted over 250 people to that first show and had to turn people away. The excitement was palpable, people had developed strong relationships with these bloggers online, and bloggers had developed strong relationships with each other. Here, for the first time ever, representatives of multiple blogger subcultures – and their readers – were getting together *en masse*, in real life.

Those early days of blogging and the first year of WYSIWYG reminded me of other moments in my life where people got together around common interests and seeking community – punk rock shows at Jules' loft in Baltimore, rock shows in Seattle in 1991, the poetry scene in the mid-90's – before they became too big and imploded.

Not to simplify matters – there were a lot of factors contributing to the demise of the early blogging era – but Gawker kind of ruined everything when it irrevocably changed the tone of the culture. Nick Denton's parties were fun for a while, but soon what had been a relatively nerdy, mostly friendly and often earnest, supportive subculture became a bitchy competitive snarkfest and attracting a slew of media whores seeking book deals and page views at any cost.

The proliferation of high school kids on LiveJournal, the acquisition of Blogger by Google, all kinds of things combined to put an end to that moment, and it was probably for the best. Internet writing has evolved greatly over the past eight years, past its awkward adolescent phase and into an unsteady but promising young adulthood.

Somehow, in my mind, the dawn of the Gawker era coincided with a shift in NYC's relationship to 9/11. Maybe it was the brief economic recovery from 2004 – 2008, maybe it was the influx of new people from around the country and from abroad,

maybe it was just time passing, but the flash and irrational exuberance of this internet mini-bubble wiped away the last vestiges of any kind of community sensibility in blogging. The mini-bubble, the influx of new arrivals and a general shift in the fortunes of the city all conspired to dull the memory of 9/11 in the popular imagination. Even here it transformed from being a local event to a global event.

And New York City was *back*: brash and unapologetic, conspicuously consuming and riding high, the 2008 crash only a bump in the road. By 2011, ten years after, it felt like we were ready, finally, to put it behind us, not to forget, never forget, but move on. Even The Occupy Movement in some perverse way reinforced NYC's sense of having recovered somehow; the encampment at Zucotti Park, directly across the street from Ground Zero, changed the city's narrative from terrorism to the economy, from World Trade Center to Wall Street.

And then, just under a year ago, we had Hurricane Sandy. I was once again working in Lower Manhattan, once again displaced from my office for months in the wake of disaster. We were reminded once again of the fragility of our city; of the way of life we take for granted. Most people were starkly reminded of the ecological peril the march of progress has created and the looming crisis of climate change. It seemed like everyone was reading *The World Without Us*.

I was living in Midtown East at the time, and the morning after Sandy I watched as a flood of refugees from the East Village wandered uptown in search of food, electricity and a shower. We had spent the night safe and strangely unaffected by the storm, by now accustomed to watching first hand accounts of disaster – now with pictures and video – shared in real time, not just on blogs but social media. Everyone, everywhere, could see the flooded cars on Avenue C, the luxury boat somehow stranded on railroad tracks.

Walking through Lower Manhattan just a week or so after the hurricane, looking at the empty, boarded-up storefronts at The Seaport, the vacant lobbies of the office buildings on Water Street, the hydraulic pumps and generators, the Verizon trucks and dumpsters filled with debris, I thought back to those days after 9/11 when Lower Manhattan was cordoned off by the National Guard, when I went with my friend Elit to pick up her things at her apartment one block below Ground Zero and a military escort was required. I reflected back on the eerie silence, an apocalyptic presentiment of the built environment bereft of people, our tenuous hold on "civilization", how quickly we might revert to barbarism and our own heedless pursuit of progress at the peril of our own destruction.

Today, upon reflection, it seems that it might be worth examining our accepted notions of progress and success. I look back at 9/11 and my life in the ensuing years and, as futile as it might be, try to draw some kind of connection, some kind of learning arc that allows me to believe that I am somehow wiser than I was, that I have somehow learned something. Above all else I would say I have learned the difference between being there live and only experiencing life through media.

We inhabit a moment where nearly every waking instant is mediated, we receive our information from radio, television, film, the Internet; we are "always on" and "always connected", we communicate by email, Skype, SMS, Twitter, Facebook and, occasionally, telephone. Increasingly, we receive our information only through media, often visual media, not even solid printed matter that at least creates a *sense* of pause and reflection. It is a wonderful thing to always be able to be connected, it is a less wonderful thing to never be able to turn off.

All around us we are experiencing the world, experiencing our lives, from within an isolated Self that yearns to connect with other Selves. When you live through a 9/11, through a battle, through a hurricane or a flood, when you live through the loss of a loved one or a personal crisis, as much as it is a shared experience, you still experience it alone. So many of us here – and even more so in the war-torn and disadvantaged parts of the world – are moving through the world in a state of constant, low frequency (or disabling) PTSD that we don't acknowledge, either in our interpersonal interactions or our social policies. We talk about waging a Global War on Terror, which is not only incomprehensible, but inherently contradictory – how can you lessen Terror through War, which is by definition terrible and terrifying? The only way to lessen terror is through compassion, and the path to compassion is connection.

While our connected age helps us share what we see in real time, helps us locate each other, it is worth nothing at all unless it brings us together in real life, in the material world, to look each other in the eyes, to hold each other close, to try and teach each other through physical proximity what it means to be in community, to appreciate how we are different *and* what we share. We must endeavor to bridge the

unbridgeable ontological gap between I and Thou and learn how it is to be with each other here and now.

Don't get me wrong, I love the Internet, but having lived with it for about 20 years I think we are due to grow up. We are entering a new era. As fast-evolving technology enables us to move into a completely mobile, connected space, we will become increasingly mediated in our everyday lives. Just as writing on the Internet has evolved from confessional diaristic blogging to more sophisticated discourse, we must evolve our ability to negotiated mediated and unmediated space, to be intentional about when are connected and when we turn off, to insure that we control the machines, not the other way around.

When I look back at 9/11 I remember the horror, but I also remember the extraordinary humanity that arose in the aftermath of disaster. Rebecca Solnit writes about this phenomenon in her book *A Paradise Built In Hell*. From 9/11 to the blackout of 2003 to Hurricane Sandy, I have seen the remarkable transformation that happens in NYC when our media fail and we are forced out into the streets to find each other and take care of each other, in person. When Being There is a necessity, not a luxury.

About The Author



Andrew Horwitz is a critic, curator and founder of Culturebot Arts & Media, Inc., publisher of Culturebot.org, the web's foremost thought-leading arts and culture magazine.

He was co-organizer of The Brooklyn Commune Project, a grassroots initiative to organize, activate and empower performing artists of all disciplines to create a more equitable and inclusive arts ecology in the United States and is a 2013 recipient of the prestigious Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for his new research project, Ephemeral Objects: Art Criticism for the Post-Material World.

From 2010-2013 he worked as the Director of Public Programs for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council where he curated The River To River Festival, a free, month-long multidisciplinary arts festival at sites throughout Lower Manhattan. Previously he worked as Producer at Performance Space 122 and, from 2007-2009, curated the PRELUDE Festival at the Martin E. Segal Theater Center at the Graduate Center at CUNY. Other curatorial projects include "The Future At The End Of The World" at the Farley Post Office (December 2012) and "Ephemeral Evidence" at Exit Art Gallery (May 2012). He has also worked as Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Andrew has advised dozens artists and served on numerous panels for arts organizations and funders including the Mellon Foundation, United States Artists, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage's Philadelphia Music Project, New Music USA, The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists, the National Performance Network, The MAP Fund, Here Arts Center, Dixon Place and more.