

Performance Art as Cultural Effacement

by David Bateman

Roselee Goldberg, in the preface to her foundational work Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present, explains that “Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture” (Goldberg 9). Emerging out of a half century of experimental art forms such as Dada and Surrealism, performance art, a close relation to theatre, simultaneously utilizes and defies traditional theatrical tools such as script, setting, costume, director/actor relationship, and the idea of repeating the same performance nightly. By doing so, traditional, “universalized” notions of what theatre is gradually begin to be blurred and de-stabilized by an art form that, by degree, is reliant upon and resistant toward a part of its own history. With reference to Linda Hutcheon’s work on Postmodernism, Robert Wallace states, in Producing Marginality, that -

the breakdown of the belief systems or frameworks of meaning that formed the foundation of cultural coherence and continuity until World War Two has provided a breakthrough for artists who have been marginalized by the hegemonous thinking of white patriarchy. (Wallace 141)

This gradual disintegration/de-centering of belief systems and traditional frameworks has created a paradoxical position of both power and weakness that has given the postmodern performance artist what Hutcheon has called “a marginal or ‘ex-centric’ position with regard to the central or dominant culture, because the paradox of underlining and undermining cultural ‘universals’ . . . implicitly challenges any notions of centrality (and centralization of) culture” (Hutcheon Canadian 3). Challenging the idea of universality as a commonly held aim for art and artists has become a staple of much of contemporary performance art. Robert Wallace urges postmodern artists to make this resistance an integral part of their chosen art form when he suggests that “the only antidote to cultural effacement is the cultivation of diversity in as many forms as possible - the production of marginality as a deliberate and defiant act of artistic resistance” (Wallace 164). Performance art has consistently fulfilled Wallace’s call to artists as it has run the gamut from purely visual events reliant upon objects and/or movement to the more script-oriented treatments common to the work of artists such as Spalding Gray, Karen Finley, Daniel MacIvor, and Shawna Dempsey – to name only a few. Consequently, performance art has evolved since the nineteen seventies into a diverse hybrid of theatre that neither re-inscribes nor fully resists its “natural” ancestry. Making a distinction between theatre and performance has been cautioned against as a tendency toward “giving a ‘preciousness’ to performance art that it does not deserve or need” (Battcock, Nickas Eds 122). By admitting to its roots performance art, and performance artists, continue to occupy a precarious position of empowerment and disempowerment familiar to anyone involved in any form of marginalized cultural activity.

Although the 1970s have been designated as the historical moment during which performance art rose to public attention, it can be argued, quite simply, that the history of

theatre has always contained the seeds of performance art. From those seeds however one must glean the sharp differences that give performance art its special assignation as a hybrid, often overtly politicized, theatrical form:

The history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public. For this reason its base has always been anarchic. By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists. Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself (Goldberg 9).

Forms of theatrical naturalism and realism that emerged out of a mid-to-late nineteenth-century fascination with the interrogation of human subjects and their relation to social issues – exemplified in plays by Zola and Ibsen – have, in specific cases, shared with performance art the desire to re-present subjectivity to a viewing public as a means toward the questioning of established social and aesthetic values. Ibsen, in particular, often resisted claims that his work was not blatantly political in its tendency to lay bare particular systems of oppression that relegated women to subservient positions. Nevertheless, some of his most famous works reveal these systems very clearly (e.g. Hedda Gabler, A Doll's House) and provide concise, if not always positive, answers for the female characters involved. However, as Ibsen himself said in an interview, “I only ask. My task is not to answer.” (Poem, “A Letter In Rhyme”, 1875) ” (Meyer Ed. 62). Ibsen's realism asked significant questions concerning social values and answered in a variety of “realistic” ways ranging from the suicide of Hedda Gabler to the departure of Nora from her home and family.

Although realism has been viewed by a number of feminist critics as a form that is “always a reinscription of the dominant order [thereby a form that] could not be useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social structure” (Dolan 161), there have been historical moments when the realist narrative has become an affront – a cultural effacement – to mainstream values, and censored accordingly. The example of Nora from A Doll's House is a case in point. In early productions the ending was altered, re-inscribing the maternal position in an oppressive manner by forcing Nora to take the children with her when she flees from her husband's tyranny, rather than liberating herself and following her own convictions regarding the most productive move for a woman in her position.

Ibsen's “heroines,” in their supreme dissatisfaction with patriarchal structures, make gestures toward elements of feminist performance that have become staples of the kind of performance monologue that has been the trademark of artists such as Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Kate Bornstein, Diane Flacks and Shawna Dempsey. However, as Elin Diamond has suggested in Unmaking Mimesis,

Realism, the mimesis of a true self, has no ability to represent or translate this undecidable state, which is perhaps why *Hedda Gabler* has a double ending that calls into crisis the seeable field of realisms' stage” (Diamond Unmaking 27).

Jill Dolan, in Presence and Desire, articulates these sentiments further when she says that “the realism debates were never about ‘silencing women [or men] writers who don't

write right,' . . . but, rather, depended on a commitment to thinking about the importance of form in launching effective cultural change" (Dolan Presence 27).

This disjuncture between elements of performance art and realist theatre brings us to the question of how a new form of theatre – performance art and the performance monologue – begins to resist ideas of a “true self” and re-present the notion of multiple subjectivities that go into the making of a single identity. One mid-twentieth theatre practitioner who began to lay the groundwork for the theatrical expression of fractured subjectivity was Bertolt Brecht. His famous alienation effect required the actor to portray emotions opposite to those one might expect from the ones suggested by the text. Brecht writes: “The alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed . . . If the actor . . . displays an apparently composed character, then his terror at this point . . . will give rise to an alienation effect” (Brecht 94-95). Although this approach to emotion is not always the case in feminist theatre or performance art, the general idea of creating an “alienating” effect on stage has become a staple of some postmodern material feminist theatre and performance art in general. Brecht’s theories encourage a form of theatre that challenges traditional assumptions about society in general - thereby challenging the aesthetic forms that society has come to rely upon. His work has been described by Jill Dolan, in *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*, as a form of theatre “based in a Marxian analysis that meant to demystify the dominant ideology masked by conventional theatre” (Dolan, *Feminist* 14). Dolan goes on to say that feminist performance critique focuses more on “the material conditions of gender positioning, rather than economic determinism” (Dolan *Feminist* 14). She is careful not to over-emphasize the debt to Brecht and provides an articulate analysis of the ways in which certain forms of feminist theatre (i.e. materialist feminist theatre) diverge from strict Brechtian ideology as it relates to Marxist ideology.

A prime example of material feminist theatre can be found in the work of Split Britches, a performance collective comprised of three women (Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver) who developed scripts throughout the nineteen eighties and into the early nineties. Their performance texts represent a conscious attempt to de-stabilize notions of female subjectivity and to transform the female body on stage (specifically the lesbian body) into a viable, celebratory agent of social and political change. In performance the troupe utilized traditional theatre techniques such as set and costume in resistant ways that simultaneously employed and defied traditional forms. What may appear to be a play in the context of a Split Britches production becomes a form of queer performance art that furthers postmodern strategies insistent upon challenging societal norms and aesthetic values. Split Britches exemplifies the ways in which feminist theory and Brechtian theory conspire to create/influence a new form (performance art) that, as stated earlier, admits to its roots in theatre in a paradoxical and inherently postmodern way by utilizing “History and/as Intertext” (Moss Ed 169).

Performance art, as an inter-textual medium, drawing upon a variety of cultural texts (e.g. theatre, visual arts) represents an aesthetic form that is simultaneously theatrical and non-theatrical. The brand of material feminist theatre practice that Jill Dolan speaks of (i.e. Split Britches) utilizes conventional theatre techniques in order to refute them within a single dramatic text. The performance monologue, in a similar way, and yet depending

upon a solo subject to do all the “work”, allows the de-centered subject to take his or her own subject position onto the stage without the realist convention of an ensemble cast. This streamlining of subject position[s] allows for an important paradox that many solo performance artists may find appealing. We are simultaneously unified as the lone speaking body and non-unified as the purveyor of many narrative texts that comprise our overall subjectivity. This paradoxical stage presence may ultimately serve the solo performance artist well in her or his pursuit of an aesthetic form that challenges traditional assumptions about culture and society at large.

The idea of a split/multiple subjectivity brings me to the work of Peggy, Shaw, Spalding Gray, and John Leguizamo, as they re-enact auto-biographical journeys through a variety of fractured identities that ultimately serve, by degree, a feminist project that insists upon the de-centered, ex-centric positions Linda Hutcheon relates to post-modernity, and Robert Wallace speaks of when he aligns his gay liberationist agenda with feminist principles. My own performance work, to be discussed in detail in the following sections, was born, and re-born, of this ever-evolving desire to interrogate the many identities the effeminate male may inhabit in a single body and a performance lifetime. This quest opens up limitless areas of aesthetic value, identity, and subjectivity for the solo monologist to explore. **The Performance Monologue: Essentially Non-Essential & Queer?**

I was on the verge of becoming a man. That’s a very queer place to be . . . On the verge. You’re there and you’re not really there, simultaneously, and something happens and you take the plunge, or you don’t. (Bateman Salad Days 84)

By examining the performance monologue as a sub-genre of performance art I shall begin to reveal some of the particular practical elements and critical theoretical frameworks that have influenced this art form, allowing it to expand and thrive as it continues to challenge societal norms. From the lesbian feminist work of Shawna Dempsey, work that consistently examines a woman’s body as receptacle for cultural misidentification and subsequent recuperation, to the politically astute representations of Karen Finley’s “heroines” who speak directly to their subject positions as victims of rape and abject poverty, the performance monologue in contemporary culture holds the performative promise that the individual artist may begin to assist liberationist projects - projects in aid of oppressed subjects attempting to gain agency in an increasingly dehumanizing and traumatizing environment. Holly Hughes, in “An Introductory Conversation” with co-editor David Roman, prefaces O Solo Homo: the new queer performance with remarks that attest to the idea of solo performance art as a “queer” genre that consistently de-stabilizes traditional values and attempts to affirm marginalized experience by articulating the oppression inflicted by the mainstream upon the marginalized “body.” She writes:

When I travel to schools in parts of this country where there’s little chance to see this work - and that’s most of the country - students do have a sense of what the work is about: art about bodies, particularly bodies that were othered by race, by gender, by sexuality, by illness . . . Performance artists are often folk for whom “the personal is political” remained a vital challenge, rather than a piece of seventies’ kitsch or an excuse to pass off attending Twelve Step groups and aerobic classes as contributions toward social change. Consequently, few performance artists - no matter how skilled or funny -

intend simply to entertain: they mean to provoke, to raise questions, to implicate their audiences. (Hughes & Roman 8-9)

Hughes goes on to cite particular examples such as Kate Bornstein and Tim Miller who, respectively, “demolish the two-party gender system by introducing us to new galaxies of gender and sexuality” and stage new “chapter[s] in gay male eroticism with . . . [the] portrayal of a relationship between an HIV-negative and an HIV-positive man” (Hughes & Roman, 9). Examples like these demonstrate how the performance monologue can act as intervention into traditional notions of what the body, on stage and off, can and should be allowed to experience/represent. Solo performance art, at its most politically efficacious, begins to inscribe as valid life choices for bodies that matter only outside of the mainstream what has been considered by that same mainstream culture as transient, risky, and mutable. The notion of “bodies that matter” is, of course, drawn from Judith Butler’s book of that name where she speaks indirectly to the particular strain of performance art that consistently addresses the marginalized other. Her project reflects Holly Hughes’ idea of performance art as a form that is often concerned with the corporeal subject. Butler says:

My purpose here is to understand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of “sex” - where that domain is secured through a heterosexualizing imperative - might at once be produced as a troubling return, not only as an imaginary contestation that effects the failure in the workings of the inevitable law, but as an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all. (Butler Bodies 23)

Performance artists continue to do precisely what Butler articulates here as her “purpose” when they re-present on stage the plight of particular othered bodies. In doing so they gain a degree of control - albeit precarious - over the hegemony of a predominantly straight white theatre that continues to dominate Western culture. This degree of control is something that theorists and practitioners have, as Wallace urges, exercised effectively in the past and must continue to enact in the future:

We have done this before and we can do it again - not as a nation united as one force but as a people decentred into many. As Rick Salutin suggests, “We can deny that marginality is negative. We can claim it as a strength” (Wallace 164)

Although the paradoxical “strength” of performance art is often relegated to the margins of cultural activity as it addresses what has been erased and/or neglected in culture for mainstream audiences, there are examples of work that has been successful in traditional venues. Some of these artists will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Essentially a non-essentialist and queer art form, performance art, and the performance monologue in particular, as they resist strict definition, demand, by degree, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called an interrogation of the many things that “ ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 8). One can extend this definition of queer beyond ideas of the body to include other cultural issues such as aesthetic forms that refuse to signify monolithically by insisting upon a variety of historical forms within a single structure (e.g. architecture). What the

performance monologue does as a queer art form, and must continue to do if it hopes to survive hegemonic assimilation and/or neglect by and into mainstream theatre, is advance the potential for performative promise beyond each new - and old - social parameter that it comes up against on a daily, reiterative basis.