Performance / Media / Art / Culture

Selected Essays 1983–2018

Jacki Apple

Edited by Marina LaPalma

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For Rachel R.

In Memoriam

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THE TV GENERATION:

MEDIA CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

We are conditioned more by cinema and television than we are by nature…. The cinema isn't just something inside the environment; the intermedia network of cinema, television, radio, magazines, books and newspapers is our environment, a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism.

Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* 1970

Performance in the Eighties: The TV Generation (1984)

A new generation of performance artists is emerging in the 1980s whose concerns, influences, and expectations, as well as their style and content, are distinctly different from the generation preceding them. Breaking down the barriers between art and life, artist and spectator, the act or process of making art and the art itself is no longer the primary issue. Quite the opposite. There is an ironic twist to the art/life interface that has dominated the avant-garde visual and performance arts for three decades.

Simultaneously, in our media-dominated culture, the boundaries between fact and fiction have rapidly collapsed, often making it difficult to differentiate between the two. In a society consumed by "spectacle" on a daily basis, so-called "real life" and the language surrounding it have been theatricalized. The world *is* a stage. More than a decade ago innovators of new theater and performance art replaced "acting" as someone else with "performing" as oneself. Andy Warhol declared that everyone should be a star for fifteen minutes, and in Santa Barbara an American family named Loud allowed a TV crew to move in with them and broadcast their lives. Today a recent TV poll tells us that the American public is "bored with Beirut." The world is a television or film soundstage on which daily life is played out and played back. The presentation of image subsumes ideology and identity; performance is paramount. Even our personal emotions are suspect of being merely behaviorally conditioned, media-induced responses. It is indeed possible that if the 1984 season had featured a prime-time weekly series about a man running for President, its star might have had a better chance of beating Ronald Reagan than Walter Mondale does.

In terms of art history, the intellectual position and philosophical ideals of the Modernist avant-garde were rooted in a belief in the future — the notion of progress, and of the artist as revolutionary and/or explorer on the frontiers of the unknown in an ever-expanding universe of unlimited possibilities. Unlike twenty years ago, visions of the future, art or otherwise, are hard to come by these days, and the artist has become more translator than prophet. The stance

of postmodern performance artists of the 1980s is characterized by a non-linear synchronic relationship to past, present, and future, the recycling and reinterpretation of already existing information, manipulation rather than invention. Their work is distinguished by their use of conventional television, film, theater, and cabaret formulas and structures, allusionism, and deconstruction. Their sources of reference are popular culture, Hollywood, rock 'n' roll and new technologies, rather than conceptual, process, visual or feminist-based works of performance art in the 1970s.

This new generation of artists born between the end of the Korean War and the advent of the Vietnam War are the first children of television. Their experience of the world is significantly different from that of the preceding generations, and it is not surprising that their work reflects a view of the world profoundly influenced by that ubiquitous box. This is the emergence and coming of age of the Diet Pepsi and jeans generation that grew up on game shows, talk shows, soaps, sit-coms, and old movies on the Late Show, Ed Sullivan, Johnny Carson, and Walter Cronkite, and commercials promising spotless kitchens, perfect teeth, dry armpits, hot fast cars named after animals, sugar-free sex and eternal youth, beauty, romance, prosperity, and stardom. At the same time they are also the first generation to grow up watching daily installments of real wars, assassination, and social protests in living color. At its best their performance work portrays the contradiction and tension between the desire for the world they were promised and the unrelenting anxiety and confusion of the world they are living in.

At the forefront of this emerging group is Los Angeles artist Lin Hixson. Although her training has been primarily in the visual art world — she studied art and dance at the University of Oregon and did graduate work at Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles — Hixson now prefers to call herself a director. From 1979 to 1981 she was a founding member of the now-extinct collaborative performance ensemble Hangers whose eighteen members came from dance, theater and visual arts backgrounds. They produced seven pieces, the final one being *Birds on Pedestals with Bomber Ladies* (1981)— an hour- long, twenty-scene, multimedia extravaganza about art, politics, and the all-pervasive media, featuring twenty-one performers, with Jane Dibbell as Bernadette Devlin[1]. When Hangers disbanded in 1981 Hixson continued to collaborate with Dibbell. Together they expanded and experimented with the collaborative process, and a methodology whose precedents are in the work of Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater and Richard Schechner's Performance Group in the mid-to-late 1960s, and Elizabeth LeCompte and Spalding Gray's Wooster Group in the 1970s. In the past year and a half Hixson and Dibbell conceived and developed, produced and directed four interdisciplinary/intermedia, large-scale collaborative

group performance works: *Sway Back* (1982), *Rockefeller Center* (1982), *Sinatra Meets Max* (1983), and *Flatlands* (1983).

Hixson's strength has been in her innovative staging and often arresting and memorable imagery. There is no one else in LA whose work resembles hers. Hixson's central concern is with the application of cinematic syntax and montage techniques in all her recent works — photographically composed and framed scenes, cutaways and lap dissolves from scene to scene, and live action played against a film loop background, shifting events from real time to filmic illusory time. Her aim is to create an awareness of the illusory nature of the cinematic experience while simultaneously manipulating emotional response through the use of cinematic allusion in both images and texts.

By deconstructing form and subject matter and re-contextualizing it, she seeks to restore meaning. Conversely by reconstructing and re-enacting the structure and contents of films in a live situation, she believes that the performers become a "bridge" for the audience between the "fact" of their own lived reality and the "fiction" of the reality of the cinema. The audience's identification and connection with the vulnerability of the performers resituates them within and in relation to that dichotomy. In addition, two of her recent productions — *Rockefeller Center* and *Sinatra Meets Max* — took place "on location" outdoors at night, giving them the look and feel of film sets.

Hixson is an inveterate newspaper clipper, intrigued and concerned by the way the media transforms real events from the trivial to the profound, into disposable fictions. She is interested in the various ways to tell the same story and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated stories. Her non-linear narratives are without plot development, and her performers play themselves as well as the "characters." Hixson's scripts intercut appropriated texts from newspapers, television, movies, and literature with monologues developed by the performers.

In *Sway Back* the Film Director played by Jane Dibbell glamorously dressed in a man's suit and fedora hat, voyeuristically observes the "action" within the performance. The piece opens with her watching a home movie of the yet-to-appear cast. Her appearances at the culmination of dramatically loaded scenes diffuse these scenes and "fictionalize" them. They become so many frames from the "film." Dibbell's final monologue is taken from a newspaper interview with film director Bernardo Bertolucci in which he talks about his next film to be based on a "real-life" story he read in a newspaper.

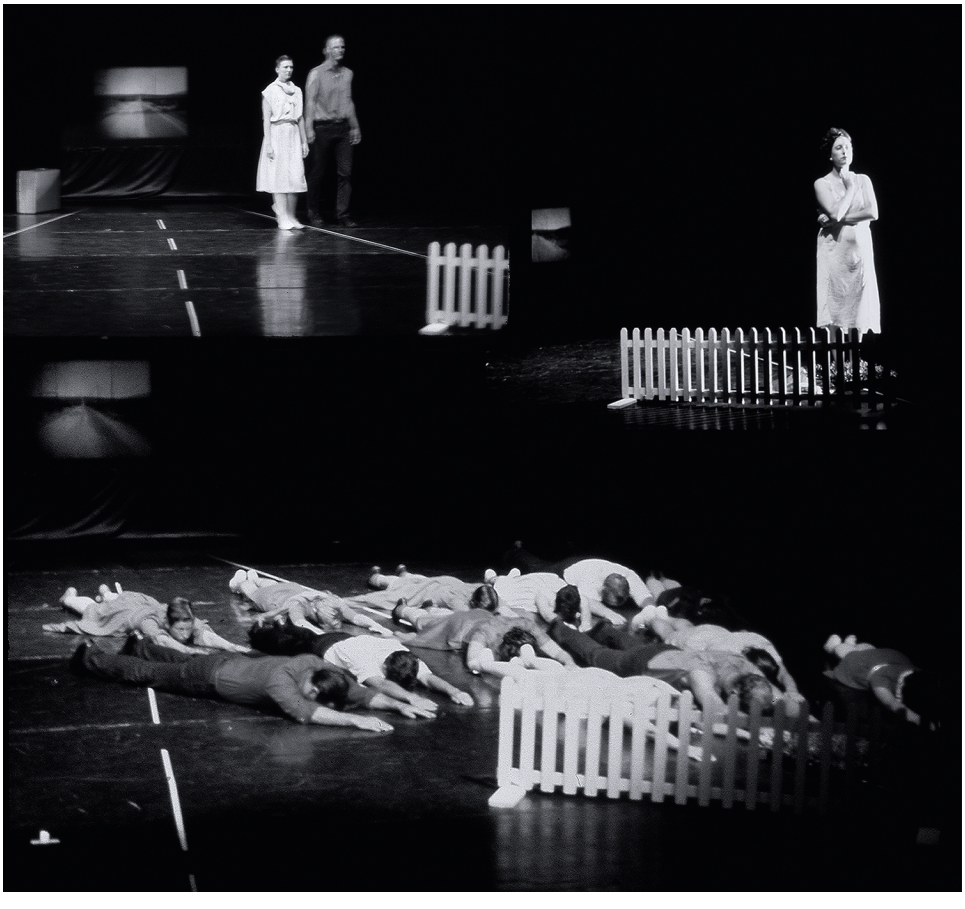
In *Rockefeller Center* performed outside at a train station in Claremont, California, a series of overlapping highly choreographed tableaux evoke romantic memories, nostalgic yearnings, and a sense of loss. A man appears with a suitcase. A woman waves to him across a field. They approach each other in slow motion. Our response to this familiar re-enactment takes on a double meaning. We identify with the filmic recollection, not the actual event.

Lin Hixson, *Sway Back* 1982. Photos: Courtesy of the artist.

Sinatra Meets Max relies heavily on movie allusions and romantic idealization. Various performers recite the opening narration from *The Road Warrior* in different styles ranging from melodrama to irony. Songs by Sinatra are sung live and on tape. The cast of forty includes a real motorcycle gang, groups of school children, a crowd of people in dark overcoats carrying suitcases and briefcases, a crowd of people carrying "ghetto blasters," family tableaux, and a fat man with a dog on a leash, all in a floodlit park-like setting with hills, trees, and paths. The values, style, and aspirations of the Sinatra era collide with those represented by the Road Warrior Max — the silent loner, cult-hero of a post-holocaust future. The 1950s meets the 1980s head-on.

In *Flatlands*, an American road story about the place we remember that never was and the horizon line we never get to, Molly Cleator appears in a

white slip, sensuously brushes back her hair and sighs deeply. She stands on a green lawn behind a white picket fence, an updated vision from Tennessee Williams or William Faulkner, and tells us in a soft southern drawl of her dream to "make something of herself," to become a singing airline stewardess and do little testimonial "commercials" in flight. She recites her accomplishments and virtues and the advice of a TV evangelist preacher who promises prosperity. She is contrasted by a tough-looking teenager in a leather miniskirt standing at the side of a flat anonymous highway (a film projection loop that runs throughout) like a hitchhiker into a *Road Warrior* future. There are excerpts of text from *The Great Gatsby* and the flight log of a Florida plane crash, personal anecdotes and one-sentence recitations of unidentified disasters in the news. The power of Hixson's work is in the way she transforms her appropriated material into metaphors with a larger meaning.



Lin Hixson, *Flatlands* 1983. Photos: Courtesy of the artist. Montage: Jacki Apple.

Hixson's work has also provided a context in which other young emerging performers could develop their styles and material. At twenty-five, Molly Cleator is one of the most promising new talents. She first met Hixson as a student at Otis Art Institute, performed in several Hangers pieces, and was memorable in both *Sway Back* and *Flatlands*. Encouraged by Hixson and Jane Dibbell, who is a skilled actress, Cleator enrolled in the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute where she studied for a year and a half. Cleator developed her autobiographical monologues as metaphors for larger social issues. Her approach is intimate and vulnerable, and she builds her "characterizations" to an unexpectedly high-tension pitch. She has a presence and quality most often found in the women in Robert Altman's films.

Private Molly, Public Molly, created, written, and performed by Molly Cleator and directed by Lin Hixson, premiered at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in October 1983. It is about performing and performance, about name brands, style, charisma, image, packaging, our fantasies of "stardom," and our idolization of performers. It is also about desire, the quest for approval, recognition, and love. It portrays our existential ennui and our detachment from "real life," the vicarious lives we live through media to fill the terrible void at the center, and the private fears, insecurities, anxieties, and bad dreams that occupy that void. Finally, *Private Molly, Public Molly* is the product of growing up and living in LA, the dream center of the world with Hollywood at its heart.

Cleator, like Hixson, is fascinated by the power that media has over our sense of identity, movies, and rock 'n' roll in particular. *Private Molly, Public Molly* is built around the tension between the appropriated material and Cleator's personal confessions. Under Hixson's skillful direction and staging, Cleator walks a precarious tightrope. We are repeatedly seduced by her, manipulated into identification and complicity, then jolted back into the relationship of audience to performer. Cleator slips in and out of her public and private selves, her daydreams and nightmares, as facilely as she changes her clothes. She puts a pair of high-heeled sandals in a bookshelf and says, "*That is Marilyn Monroe,*" and then, *"If I stand here I am Marilyn Monroe."* She tap-dances to Tom Waits. She lounges in a pale pink swimsuit by a turquoise swimming pool, then tells us how inspired she is by Aretha Franklin who lives in Encino and how what she *really* wants is to do a concert with her. She plays another song by Tom Waits whose last lines are, "I never saw your tears till they rolled down your face," and then tells us that when she closes her eyes she sees a ball of brown lava getting bigger and bigger and rolling towards her. She sits on a hard wooden chair under a painting of an empty road in perspective, wearing a gray coat and clutching a large black purse against her. She stares into space, tensely waiting, as a video tape plays featuring her being interviewed about sexual inhibitions on a real talk-show.

In a low-backed black sheath dress she "performs" an Aretha Franklin song to a record, using a bare-bulb standing lamp like a microphone. Every so often a telephone rings and a little girl's voice on the answering machine tells us Molly isn't home. The differentiation between fantasy and reality collapses in the final scene. In an intimate tone she asks us. *"You can hear 'em, can't you? They're sitting over there talking about her."* She describes the woman adoringly, almost worshipfully, telling us over and over, *"I remember that I loved her,"* shifting the emphasis to a different word each time. Only when she refers to the woman walking over to a young man in a snakeskin jacket who plays the guitar, does it become apparent that this narrative is related to an earlier scene in which Cleator in a voice filled with longing, talks to the man, then turns to us and asks if we have "any corrections" regarding her "performance." Switching to the first person Cleator becomes the woman and in a soft southern accent says, *"I don't care what you say about me…I am who I am."* The "scene" is from Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending*. In the end when she finally answers the ringing telephone, it is Elvis Costello singing to her, *I Write the Book*.

How many scenes do we each play out in our lives in which we re-enact lines, gestures, and postures from strangely familiar scenarios? Cleator makes us aware of how we mold ourselves to resemble the public personalities whom we admire, the stars and celebrities whose projected images are often as fictional as our own impersonations.

Cleator is a performer and co-writer in Lin Hixson's latest production *Hey John, Did You Take The El Camino Far?* No longer working with Jane Dibbell, Hixson has taken conceptual and directorial control, the result being a major step in both the structural and thematic cohesion and clarity of the work. Based on original stories by Hixson, *Hey John, Did You Take The El Camino Far?* was developed and scripted in collaboration with Cleator and performer and video producer Valerie Faris. Employing production methods closer to the making of a television show or film than anything resembling what we have called Performance Art, Hixson's team includes musical director-composer Bobbi Permanent, choreographer Peggy Margaret, and video director-producer Jonathan Dayton.

In all of her work Hixson has juxtaposed conflicting realities and fantasies of American life. On one side of the schism lies the optimistic, innocent, and bountiful idealized teenage America of *Father Knows Best* and *American Graffiti*. On the other side is the matter-of-fact violence of the evening news with all that it implies. Hixson's nostalgic "Americanism" is ironic in its unsentimental subversion of what is both longed for and lost. In *Hey John, Did You Take The El Camino Far?* Hixson succeeds in developing this dialectic to a far greater degree than in her earlier works. Hixson establishes two contrasting narrative themes in two distinct "plays," the second functioning as a counterpoint flashback. She then ties them together in

an epilogue rather than fragmenting them in the multi-scene tableau structure for which she has become known. The fragmentation occurs internally, both within the characters and the structure of the first story that is about a relationship between Laura, an innocent young college girl, and John, a Vietnam veteran whom she meets at school and marries circa 1969–72. At the center of this relationship is John's nightmare tale in which he claims to have thrown a grenade into his sadistic kill-crazed commanding officer's tent, killing him because he shot John's dog. Appropriating the format of the television game show *To Tell The Truth*, Hixson faces us with four women, all of whom claim to be Laura. Each presents her version of the relationship as she remembers it, a series of "snapshots" culminating in multiple accounts of John's story. John, played by Lance Loud, talks about himself in both the first and third person in a talk show moderator style. Later he aggressively and accusingly interrogates the women as if they are on trial. On a TV screen we watch the gesture of an American soldier throwing something. The image has been extrapolated from the real Vietnam TV footage broken down frame by frame, then repeating over and over until completed. The text has been deconstructed in a similar manner, thus bringing into question its very definition.

In the second act, Hixson transposes us into the world John and Laura were promised, the world they grew up with and in, but not into. She appropriates the story from the hit musical *Bye Bye Birdie* and stages a condensed version with new songs, two convertibles, the Venice High School Cheerleading Squad, and a chorus line of dancers. Rock star Lucky Loud (Lance Loud) has been drafted and will give one last kiss on the Ed Sullivan Show. A high school teen (Peggy Margaret) must choose between her steady boyfriend whom she says she loves and the chance to be kissed by the Presley-like star on national television.

In the final episode two women bring two halves of a table together in the present. They have a conversation at the table soap opera-style while on TV soldiers sing about going home. How did we get from *Bye Bye Birdie* to Vietnam to our disillusioned and anxiety-ridden present? Not in an El Camino but on TV. Hixson places two sides of the same coin side by side — an America before and after the Fall. The Fall is nothing more or less than John and Laura's respective losses of innocence, a denouement that is also our own.

Twenty-five-year-old Tim Miller's performance *Postwar* (1981) recently presented at LACE in Los Angeles has much in common with Hixson and Cleator's in both style and its subject matter. Miller speaks for his own generation — its fear and desire — with a genuine innocence. He begins by telling us his parents got married because they loved each other, had children, and bought their house for $14,000, and that back then anyone could do that. His tone is one of amazement and yearning with an underlying suggestion of betrayal, emphasizing how remote and unattainable those simple aspirations seem in this time when few people envision growing old together, and only the affluent can afford to buy a house.

Born in 1959 Tim Miller grew up in the southern California town of Whittier, home town of Richard Nixon, and at nineteen he went to New York to make his name. His work personifies the experience of growing up in white middle-class suburban America with backyard barbeques, lawnmowers, television, the Star Spangled Banner, and the Bomb, inflation, assassination, and designer labels. His inflated desires, stimulated by a childhood and adolescence bombarded with advertising, are aptly expressed in the names of detergents and breakfast cereals — Bold, Cheer, Cold Power, Total, Trix, Kix, and Life. And what is more, he wants it all — love, fame, fortune, power — and he wants it *now* because tomorrow might not come. Most of all he wants to stay alive and he alternately seduces and destroys as he tries to "figure it all out" before it's too late. His anxiety is conveyed by his frenetic delivery. The pitch and tone of the entire performance is cacophonous and chaotic within a tightly controlled, densely layered structure combining slides, text, movement, and music. A glut of information — family album photos, close-up product shots, politicians, statistics, death, destruction, and the American flag — flash by while the verbiage pours forth like machine gun fire.

Miller wants the nightmare to go away. In all of his youthful urgency he desperately wants to believe once again in the American Dream. It made a wrong turn somewhere and he wants to find out how and why and somehow set it right. In his newest work, *Democracy in America*, to premiere this fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Miller searches for the America he was taught about as a child and can't find as an adult. He's been following the election campaign trail, collecting material Studs Terkel-style, doing video interviews with all kinds of Americans about their attitudes and perceptions of the American political process and its institutions. In his own stories, Miller tells us that when he was a little boy he "really did want to be President," but not anymore.

Like Hixson, Miller's work is grounded in popular culture and media imagery, and like Cleator, autobiographical material is still the vehicle. Unlike them he still retains an innocence that expresses itself in bewilderment and indignation rather than irony. The irony lies in Miller's shrewd self-aware exploitation of that innocence in the exportation of his work to Europe where it takes on iconographic significance. In that context *Postwar* becomes a pop American product occupying the same territory as the pop culture symbols and products it draws its imagery from. Miller plays himself like a combination of a recognized star and a candidate running for office. His individuation is based on identification with a representative composite, a brand-name likeness rather than any idiosyncratic uniqueness.

Performance in the 1980s is at the center of a changing relationship between art, media, and contemporary culture. These young artists and others are attempting to carve out a vital new territory between the art world and the world of entertainment, a synthesis of performing, visual and media arts. Not only do they appropriate television, they want to be on it.

SPECTACLE, FILM, COLLABORATION

Time Lost/Time Found (2017)

How deep is time? How far down into the life of matter do we have to go before we understand what time is?

We head out into space. We brave space, line up the launch window and blast off, we swing around the planet in a song. But time binds us to aging flesh.

Don DeLillo, *Underworld* 1997

Every so often art delivers on the promise to transport us beyond the mind-numbing media assault and banalities of twenty-first-century daily life. Like a wide awake walk in nature, great art can lead us to contemplate the larger mysteries of life, one of which is the nature of time. Two recent theatrical performances have addressed this question in very different ways, both of which open us to a simultaneous perception of the macro and the micro.

South African artist William Kentridge and his collaborators virtuosic multimedia opera *Refuse The Hour* takes us on a revelatory but appropriately elliptical journey through history, science, and art in its exploration of the mechanisms and meaning of time from the Greek myth of Perseus to Einstein's revolutionary discoveries and their modernist visual representations.

On the opposite pole New York filmmaker Charles Atlas and choreographer/dancers Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener's futuristic dreamlike non-narrative visual masterpiece *Tesseract* enfolds us in a metamorphic time-space landscape traversed by dancers, their projected spirit bodies, and abstract geometric forms.

Refuse the Hour

Refuse the Hour takes place inside the constructed world of William Kentridge from the projected environs of his studio to the theatrical set inhabited by his eccentric time-measuring mechanisms, dancers, and musicians. It is the manifestation of the artist's creative process as he investigates the measurement and manipulation

of time, the problem of human perception, and the question of control — mere chance or fate.

At the center of all the action is Kentridge himself, a visual artist of remarkable range, diversity, and intellect, and an equally skilled and charismatic performer. He is the mastermind inventor and storyteller who delivers a series of historical anecdotes and philosophical musings laced with mythological, scientific, and poetic references. Dressed in black pants and white shirt, white-haired and soft-spoken, his voice and manner brought to mind Anthony Hopkins as Robert Ford in *Westworld*. He is just as mesmerizing and the questions he raises are equally compelling.

William Kentridge, *Refuse the Hour* 2017. Photo: John Hodgkiss.

It begins with the problem of Perseus who, despite an epic journey through great dangers and obstacles that by all logic should have altered his course, ends up fulfilling the prophesy of killing his father anyway, not by intent but by accident. Could he have escaped his fate? Alter the course of time that led to an otherwise unlikely conclusion? Can any of us? Are we bound by destiny or merely coincidence in an unpredictable universe? It reminds me of the possible parallel paths in the film *Run Lola Run* in which the circumstances generating the ten seconds differential of when Lola arrives at the curb determines whether or not she will be struck by a car. Is that an accident, mere luck, or some mysterious order in the algorithms of

time? Do we all inhabit multiple timelines in which we live in one, and die in the other? In her novel *Life After Life* Kate Atkinson replays this scenario over and over. But Kentridge plays out the dilemma of Einstein's theories of spacetime by demonstrating how our perceptions of time shape our experience as the clock ticks.

In past time on film Kentridge paces his studio, his mind a kaleidoscope of thoughts, ideas, questions, calculations, all colliding into each other and spinning around. He changes the speed of his walking as he marks, counts, and measures. On stage every thought is put in the context of history, simultaneously activated verbally, sonically, visually, and kinetically. Kentridge's discourse explores the problem of speed and measurement, light versus sound, mechanized synchronization versus the human body in motion, an expanding universe versus entropy and black holes. Then there is the matter of the invention of photography and its ability to "stop" time, Muybridge's studies of bodies in motion, cinema in which time can move forward and backward, and riffs on clocks and trains and Greenwich time. He even cites Einstein's twin astronaut paradox.[1] The juxtaposition of time past and present, and the interaction of his two selves in recorded and live time further illustrates his attempt to understand the malleability of time and the futility of trying to control it.

Kentridge's time-traveling narration is materialized by outsized silver megaphones through which performers shout tempo directions at three giant metronomes made from found materials like a Kurt Schwitters assemblage, as they mark time at different speeds and directions at different times. Interacting with the set are singers, dancers, musicians, and wall-sized video projections. There is also a tripod and a bicycle wheel, a sly reference to Marcel Duchamp. An extraordinary dancer Dada Masilo's costume mirrored her name, her skirt echoing a Tristan Tzara typographic collage in motion as she spun through space like an orbiting energy particle, interacting directly with Kentridge. At one point she became an animated Cubo-Dadaist object resembling Hugo Ball with megaphones on arms and a leg. At another point a dancing double made of newspaper fragments like a cubist collage was projected behind Masilo, aptly noting the simultaneous arrival of Einstein's equation and cubism's visualization of the fourth dimension.

Music, one significant way of marking time, plays a key role throughout, starting with the chaotic poundings of a mechanical drum set. Composer Philip Miller's raucous score is a wildly eclectic mix of musical sources and overlapping styles. Performed live by a rousing brass band, percussion, keyboards, and a strangely altered violin, it combines jazzy early twentieth-century dance music, an oompah tuba, and African rhythms, with modernist dissonance and sound effects, plus some gorgeous vocals from South African opera singer Ann Masina. An imposing physical presence, in one scene she looms above us as she sings a haunting rendition of Berlioz's *Le Spectre de la Rose*, while Joanna Dudley, looking as if she stepped out of *Cabaret*, counterpointed Masina's aria by singing phonemes and pitches backwards like in a Futurist sound poem. The juxtaposition of this

dynamic ensemble of South African musician/performers in Greta Goiris's extravagantly colorful African costumes with early twentieth-century avant-garde visual art and cinema also suggested an underlying temporal and political narrative about European colonialism in Africa.

William Kentridge, *Refuse the Hour* 2017. Photos: John Hodgkiss. Montage: Jacki Apple.

At the heart of *Refuse the Hour* is the matter of mortality itself. No matter what we do we cannot stop the progression of all living things from birth to death, each in its own time. Yet despite the fact that we mark time in a linear progression of minutes and hours, days, months, and years, it is actually mutable, circular, relative. Thus Kentridge refutes death with a comforting notion of immortality — that being that everything lives on in time and space. The universe is the repository of everything that has ever existed and happened carried across the galaxies by particles and waves of light and sound. The things that happened centuries ago are still alive in the telescope of a planet hundreds of light years from here.

In many ways *Refuse the Hour* is the prequel to Robert Wilson's 1977 groundbreaking, five-hour opera *Einstein on the Beach* that begins where *Refuse the Hours* leaves off. For whatever reason Kentridge decided to stop in the 1920s at the point when we begin to believe in the supremacy of technology over nature. He leaves the twenty-first-century dilemma of digital time consuming, digesting, and annihilating biological time open to future speculation. In the meantime in *Refuse the Hour*, Kentridge and his conceptual collaborator Peter Galison leave us with much to contemplate about the nature and meaning of our constructed reality and our existence within and beyond it. And isn't that what art is supposed to do.

Tesseract

There is no narration or historical timeline in Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, and Silas Riener's *Tesseract,* a multimedia production in two separate autonomous parts — a film and a live performance. Instead time is explored in the first part through the visualization of mathematical descriptions of the fourth dimension traversed by seven stunning dancers. There is no linear progression in the film's dreamlike journey through revolving and evolving spaces. Instead *Tesseract* is a kinetic visual time/space odyssey in which the performers, not unlike David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, seem either like visitors to alien worlds or alien beings on our world, depending on your perspective.

The connecting thread throughout is a tesseract, a four-dimensional analog of a cube that can be seen in animation whenever it shows a smaller inner cube inside a larger outer cube. The hypersurface consists of eight cubical cells. The eight lines connecting the vertices of the two cubes represent a single direction in the "unseen" fourth dimension — time. Hermann Minkowski's 1908 calculations that consolidated time into spacetime became the basis for Einstein's theories of Special and General Relativity. This is the realm in which *Tesseract* takes place.

The forty-five-minute film in six segments, viewed with 3-D glasses, begins with an animated tesseract, which appears and disappears, draws and redraws itself,

morphing from a linearly defined moving object into an architectural construct, to a conceptual space. Like visitors in a series of strange yet oddly familiar virtual landscapes, the dancers traverse each new environment, as one space dissolves into another. They test the limits of their bodies in space, and the forces of gravity, sometimes in form-altering costumes that interact with the landscape. In one segment the dancers occupy diagrammatic geometric structures floating like space capsules over a rocky orange desert landscape, growth-like protrusions extending from their orange bodysuits. In others their sinuous silver forms navigate a white foggy weightless airspace, or swim like sea dwellers never seeming to touch the ground, or fall to the ground at high velocity in a black- and- white interior, bodies rolling with a thunderous sound. At the end it all folds back into a tesseract in outer space, tiny points of light flickering like distant stars. The film is a sci-fi magical mystery tour that evokes the potentialities of how life forms might adapt to their environments, be they organic or synthetic. The possibilities are as boundless as the biodiversity of this planet, most of which we never see or notice, and are now seriously endangered.

If the film exists in kaleidoscopic mutable time, the live performance visualizes synchronistic parallel time as if the multiple dimensions all around us were visible. This is achieved by the interaction of live video with the live performance allowing us to simultaneously see the dancers past, present, and future from multiple viewpoints — front, side, and back. The cameraperson is onstage with them and Atlas manipulates the images as they are projected in such a way as to shadow, dislocate, and relocate them in time either instantaneously or in a matter of seconds. The effect is ghostlike, as if you could witness your spirit rising out of your body at the moment of death. Or from another perspective, if you could actually see the images of where you have been and where you are going as a projected light form. These "spirit-bodies" loom, float, levitate, and dance above and around the live bodies, changing scale, speed, and location. They are weightless, matter transformed into energy, unbound by gravity as they are set aloft in space and time.

And then there is the dancing itself. The choreography by Mitchell and Riener, both accomplished Merce Cunningham dancers, fully utilizes Cunningham's movement vocabulary and philosophy while extending it into new terrain. The dancing is exhilarating. The energized body moving in and through space testing the limits, unembellished by narrative or emotional content is Cunningham's timeless legacy, and the dancers, including Mitchell and Riener, carry it forward with clarity, precision, and eloquence. Add the interplay with the projected images and it becomes transporting and utterly contemporary. For in this digital age we leave traces of ourselves everywhere, intended or not. Our images, thoughts, tastes, habits, likes, and dislikes make up virtual ghost portraits that exist beyond our awareness. They shadow us in the ether.

In the second act of *Tesseract* Atlas employs technology to reveal the mysteries of our corporeal existence, making it the kind of kinetic visual work that needs to be

Charles Atlas, Rashaun Mitchell, Silas Riener, *Tesseract*. 2017 Photos: Ray Felix/ Empac/ Center right Nathan Kay. Montage: Jacki Apple.

experienced in real time and space to fully appreciate its deeper levels of meaning. But perhaps like Kentridge's idea of immortality, Atlas's ghostly time-traveling projections and the dancers that generated them will live on not only in our memories and imagination, but to be retrieved in the future at another point in spacetime in this expanding universe or another. There is something uplifting maybe even transcendent in that idea, that ought to inspire us to do better in the life we are living.

CROSSING CULTURES:

SOUND, SPACE, GESTURE

Peripheral Visions: Perspectives on Culture, Media, and Performance (2017)

Whoever controls language determines the future. This is the message in George Orwell's prophetic novel *1984*. In the age of Twitter and social media, when language is abused, debased, and used to mislead, when hyperbole, slogans, and propaganda replace knowledge, and reasoned debate gives way to opinion, belief, and demonizing, we are all at risk. As language shrinks so do all the nuances of critical thinking. In such circumstances restoring integrity and meaning to language takes on a sense of urgency. It requires attention to the complexities and contradictions of our social, cultural, and political climate, and a willingness to challenge the status quo, including the rhetoric of fear, be it cultural or political, on the left and the right.

Thus we need to examine the challenges and responsibilities facing artists who employ visual, verbal, and kinetic language as a means to open eyes and ears to other ways of seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling, as well as those of us who write about the arts and culture. There is inspiration to be found in the work of those who have resisted the insidious process of erasure and contradiction that leads to a "normalized" acceptance of the oppression underlying this form of mental reprogramming. Understanding history matters!

The reading of visual iconography is marked not only by the language we use to describe and interpret it, but by the experience of the viewer, the intent of the maker, and the context in which it is seen. What I define as "performance" encompasses all forms of time-based works; likewise what comprises media arts is equally inclusive. The statue in the plaza is not simply an esthetic object, but a "performative" one. Just as communications technology is not a neutral space but a powerful interactive tool in which language and image can be used to create, illuminate, or manipulate "reality."

Bearing Witness and Being Present

We listen to the news, watch the images and we are appalled at each report of the senseless fatal shooting of young black men by police. We might ask ourselves how this epidemic could be happening again in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the aftermath of each incident from Ferguson to Charlottesville we see history recycling itself. At what point do we stop feeling the impact? How long before we become numbed by the barrage of rhetoric, indignation, and rage from Black Lives Matter to White Supremacists? And then we might ask how does an artist break through all the clichés to make an audience feel it in the flesh, make the experience real and present.

Choreographer, dancer, and performance artist Jessica Emmanuel does it with her body. In her evocative solo *Witnessing Her* Emmanuel drew a gut-wrenching, slow motion portrait not simply of what it means to be black in America, but of what it feels like to be the recipient of violence. But first she put us at ease with ironic humor. She recruited two audience members to draw her outline from memory in white chalk on standing black pegboards. One female, the other male, they were ominous reminders of the police outlines of dead bodies on the street.

The lighting changed and the mood became somber as she assumed the role of the victims, her body contorting with each shot, twelve in all. The first bullet to the hip, the second to her stomach, the third to her heart, the fourth to a knee, the fifth to her neck, the sixth to a foot, the seventh to the other knee, the eighth to her head, the ninth to a shoulder, the tenth to the head again, the eleventh to her neck, the twelfth misses its mark. She drew red ribbons from those points on her body to the corresponding points on the chalk bodies as if marking the path of each bullet with a line of blood. The moment of impact was made ever more powerful by the controlled economy of her movement, the precision of each gesture causing one to involuntarily flinch, or recoil in response. We could feel her pounding heart, the breath knocked out of her, the fear, pain, and defenselessness. Yet not a word was spoken. Cory Williams' electronic score with its pulsing drone and shifting pitches created an ambience that underscored the tension.

Emmanuel seamlessly evolved from victim to grieving survivor laying five little dresses across the floor at the back of the stage. As she moved from one to another she re-enacted the gestures of being shot, reliving the moment over and over, but never overplaying it. Instead she let it slowly build to a climax. When she gathered up the girls dresses her anguish and despair was palpable, culminating in a heart-piercing sob.

For those of us old enough to remember, and for whom history is a living body of knowledge, a thousand images come to mind and form a background of references.

For all of us the immediacy of theater brings it into the present. The power of live performance is in its intimacy. In making the political personal, Emmanuel was able to connect directly with her audience on a visceral and emotional level in real time and space. By enabling them to empathize, she created an opening to another way of understanding and responding to these events, and hopefully an awakening to our responsibility as citizens.

Jessica Emmanuel, *Witnessing Her* 2017. Photo: Stephen Wright.

At the same time Kathryn Bigelow's brilliant film *Detroit* is as timely and as relevant in its subject matter, and as powerful in the way it pulls the audience into the center of the action, claustrophobically close-up and inescapable in its intensity. Although fact-based and set in the midst of the 1967 civil unrest that ravaged a whole section of the city, director Bigelow, and writer Mark Boal's film is neither a journalistic nor historical account. Instead it is character-driven, personal, and visceral. It takes us inside a single event where we come face to face with the naked brutality and pathology of racism embodied in a young white policeman and his cronies, and how it shatters the lives of innocent young people, both black and white, all unarmed civilians trapped in its path. What happened in the Algiers Motel on that terrifying night of July 25–26, 1967 fell into the margins of history.

Three African-American men died at the hands of law enforcement, the others were brutalized, but the perpetrators of the murders and the unrelenting abuse that led up to them, were never convicted. It would be hard not to feel shattered by the fear and injustice we have just lived through on screen, and filled with compassion and indignation in the aftermath.

The emotional and psychological narratives that unfold inside the motel alongside the pent-up rage unleashed in the streets of Detroit are as deeply revealing of the present state of this nation as they were fifty years ago. The shock of that truth has dominated the media for more than a year, its ugly face unmasked both in the White House and in the rallies invoked in its name. But we need to know that as horrifying as what we witnessed on screen was, in the survivors' words, it was much worse in reality.

Which leaves us with the question as to why, despite all the critical acclaim, so few people went to see this film. Why did *Detroit* die at the box office when it is the film everyone needs to see. Were people too fatigued by the onslaught of daily disasters, and thus preferred to escape into the digitized domain and sanitized violence of comic book fantasies? Or were they unwilling to look into the face of confrontation and experience the humiliation and pain of the victims and taste the bile of the bigots? Or was the ambivalence of those in the middle who turn away when they could do more, the source of rejection? Regardless, *Detroit* will live on as a cinematic artwork that speaks to us about who we are as a culture.

One of the ironies revealed in the film but not noted by reviewers was that two of the young men in the Algiers were Motown singers Larry Reed and Fred Temple (who lost his life). They had dreams and ambitions, and a belief in the power of art. Prior to being beaten, a mostly white audience had been embracing the music in a theater not far away. The fact that this music had already become a part of the soundtrack of our lives is emblematic of the schism in the American psyche.

Which brings us to the matter of public statues and the values they represent. Perhaps we should replace Robert E. Lee with Marvin Gaye. Or maybe with Larry Reed and/or Fred Temple, the two members of the group the Dramatics who were in the Algiers that fatal Detroit night.

Faustin Linyekula's Journey from Darkness to Light (2017)

As Americans we are repeatedly stunned, shocked, appalled by each new incident of a seemingly random, mass shooting by some male loner motivated by personal rage and despair rather than ideological zeal. The most recent being Las Vegas, the one with the largest body count. But before that there was Orlando, Santa Barbara, various other school campuses and public places, names faded in memory going back to Columbine. We wring our hands and shed tears of sympathy for the victims and their families. Speeches are made decrying the availability of military grade weaponry. Voices are raised condemning gun culture. And then our lives go on with business as usual. Until the next time, for in the deepest darkest place in the national psyche we accept it will happen again.

Some historians might argue that our nation was built on a foundation of violence and slavery from the outset. And if you are African-American more than a century of lynching, incarceration, and police brutality are part of your heritage. Except for those who have served in the military, to live with the daily violence and destruction of perpetual war and local conflict as in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia is for most Americans unimaginable on a visceral level. It is something we watch, pictures on a screen, not something we live in the middle of. We can turn it off. As for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, also briefly known as Zaire, many Americans have no idea where that is, or even care. For those that read books in their youth, the Congo may be recalled as the otherworldly locale of late nineteenth-century colonial exploitation portrayed in Joseph Conrad's novella *The Heart of Darkness*, which ironically became the inspiration for Francis Ford Coppolla's Vietnam War epic film *Apocalypse Now.*

In 2012 Jeffrey Gettleman, the East Africa bureau chief for *The New York Times* described the Congo as "a never-ending nightmare, one of the bloodiest conflicts since World War II, with more than five million dead." A land of spectacular natural resources, it is one of the poorest nations on earth. First made a colony by King Leopold of Belgium in 1870, it finally achieved independence June 1960 under

the name Republic of Congo, only to subsequently be ruled and renamed by a few of Africa's most corrupt and repressive dictators, Mobutu Sese Seko and Joseph Kabila. A pawn in the Cold War, and the battleground of competing "revolutionary" groups from both outside and inside the country, the Congo has been "rived by civil war, haunted by warlords and drugged-up child soldiers," and called "the rape capital of the world" by the UN (Gettleman).

Faustin Linyekula/Studio Kabako, *Sur Le Traces de Dinozord (In Search of Dinozord)* 2017. Photos: Steven Gunther.

And yet, what is most remarkable is that out of this, or in the midst of it, has arisen poetry, a belief in beauty and love, and in art as one's highest calling, an act of salvation and redemption. Faustin Linyekula/Studio Kabako's performance *Sur Le Traces de Dinozord (In Search of Dinozord)* is just such a transcendent and

breathtaking work. Performed at REDCAT before a spellbound audience it is an act of remembrance and reclamation. Pain, loss, and suffering are made palpable through the bodies of the six men in the company, but so are friendship, brotherhood, and love. Their experiences and that of their country are given voice as lived and witnessed. But unlike much of contemporary political theater in our western postmodern world, it is done without recrimination, righteousness, or outrage. "In the face of political corruption, child soldiers and senseless death, was it possible to make poetry and beauty?" Linyekula asked himself in 2007. Apparently so! Which leads us to wonder at how he found the way to do that.

As Mark Swed so eloquently described in his *Los Angeles Times* review — "Rather than redirecting power, as protest art feels it must do, Linyekula simply soaks it up, bravely, at times violently, and you fear possibly fatally, but never sanctimoniously." But then this work, although essentially political, is not simply a protest work. The creation and performance of *Dinozord* is a spiritual act not just of survival but of forgiveness. It embodies the triumph of the creative imagination over darkness, despair, and hopelessness. Out of the artist's journey of self-empowerment arose the necessity of reclaiming one's culture in all its diversity and richness and saving it from extinction in the wasteland of post-colonialism's endless ethnic power struggles and political strife. Hence the name Dinozord with its reference to *dinosaur,* as in searching for something lost. It represents Linyekula and his Kisangani Studio Kabako colleagues' sense of themselves as the "last of a tribe." Yet they do not present themselves as victims. Rather as active participants fully engaged in their own and their country's transformation. There is sorrow but without the sting of acrimony, despite the death of friends, incarceration, torture, and exile. Remarkably there are no sides taken in the presentation of unembellished historical facts.

The performance opens with five men in white shirts and dark pants standing on the far left. Another in white face stands alone on the far right, his raised hand with spread fingers vibrates as an intense blast of electronic music sends out a high-pitched, pounding, screaming wave of sound. It seems to charge through his body like an electrical current. Or is it the other way around, emanating from him? This is a choreography conceived in a different language, a form of narrative poetry written in, with, and *through* the body, not on it. What follows for the next ninety minutes is a heart-pounding dance of breath, blood, and tears. The bodies of the six dancers engage in variations of intense spasmatic movements, taking in resonating energy and expelling it back out. The evening culminates in dancer Jeannot Kumbonyeki Deba's boundary-shattering, body/soul merger with Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile*.

In between the story unfolds in fragments like stanzas in an epic poem or sonata. Some verses repeat like the chorus in a song. Others are operatic arias

sung by an astounding countertenor Serge Kakudji. Spoken softly in French, the narrative shifts between personal accounts, dreams, memories, and excruciating tales of brutality, along with expositions of political events. These include being seduced by a fanatical ideology that *"turns thinking men into beasts."* At one point the performers crawl on all fours, growling and snarling like a pack of rabid feral dogs. The speaker raises them to their feet, reclaiming their humanity as organ music by Arvo Part swells. The spasms in their bodies express the struggle of redemption. A video message from exiled former prisoner Antoine Vumilia Muhindo serves as witness.

Interwoven throughout is the effort to resurrect and preserve the legacy and memory of Linyekula's fallen friend, Kabako, a poet with dreams of changing the world and African literature. Instead he died of bubonic plague and became the martyred namesake of their theater group — Studio Kabako. A large red metal trunk serves as storage container and coffin for Kabako's body and writings in repeated rituals of grief and mourning. When he falls down in a spasm, his compatriots raise him to his feet, resurrected. At different times the dead man is stuffed into the trunk, laid out and held tenderly, shocked back to life, covered in white body paint, and accompanied by sections of Mozart's *Requiem* which Linyekula declares as *"The last king in a short dynasty. The last sleep. The last kiss."* The ideal anthem for the last tribe! Serge Kakudji sings of lost dreams as Kabako's tattered writings are spilled out and strewn across the stage, then repeatedly retrieved.

Kabako is a ghost, a symbol of all who have disappeared and with them their stories. *"History will ignore what I have seen … steamrollered into oblivion."* Linyekula and his troupe — dancers Jeannot Jeannot Kumbonyeki, Papy Ebotani, and Yves Mwamba; the countertenor Serge Kakudji; and the actor Papy Maurice Mbwiti do not accept that. Instead of exile like Muhindo, they choose to return to their home in Kisangani in the *"spittoon republic"* to keep Kabako's dream alive, to build a model of a different reality through their art, and to stake a claim on the future.

Which brings us back to the finale. Jeannot Kumbonyeki's solo to Jimi Hendrix's music is the culmination of an ideal set forth early on and more. "*God saw man's misery. God danced. Dance is magic, the magic of joy."* Hendrix reborn in and through the body of the dancer is pure exultation, a wordless revelation so transformative in its jubilation as to literally take your breath away. *La joie de vivre* incarnate!

What does it take to have the capacity to rise above all the brutality and suffering that surrounds you to make something of such power and beauty? Sheer force of mind and will? A moral imperative so strong it conquers fear? A deeply held spiritual belief in beauty, poetry, music, and dance as essential to the life of body and soul? Or is it a resilience grounded in an idea about what it takes to become a fully integrated and conscious human being, and thus a liberated one?

Through the determination and eloquence of the Congolese men who had the courage and vision to create this work, we have a chance to see a different perspective on what is of true value, and what it takes to make a better self and a better world in the face of overwhelming obstacles. There are lessons to be learned here. We should pay close attention. And maybe look more deeply into our own heart of darkness and the moral morass, violence, vulgarity, hypocrisy, and mendacity that has infected our own culture and country in this very sad time.

Faustin Linyekula/Studio Kabako, *Sur Le Traces de Dinozord (In Search of Dinozord)* 2017. Photos: Steven Gunther.

HISTORY RESTAGED

The Sound of History Dreaming the Future (1991)

Cities, like humans, possess individual personalities, physical characteristics passed from generation to generation. They also possess that more abstract quality we call a soul or spirit. A city is, after all, the ultimate manifestation of human social organization and aspirations, a mirror of the collective psyche and cumulative product of its social, political, cultural, and personal histories.

In the latter sense, American and European cities bear little resemblance to each other. The average urban American expanse, the island of Manhattan being an anomaly, exists in an amnesiac state of ever-presentness, constantly erasing and replacing itself. Born of modernity, capitalism, and transience, it eradicates the past as an ideological act. Its monuments — the skyscraper, the expressway, the shopping mall — are the embodiment of impermanence cast as progress. In this culture of disappearance history is what you remember.

On the other hand, the average European city is a map that charts the evolution of a culture across centuries like an ancient tree. The old city, built around the cathedral and the palace, remains in the heart of the new. The medieval, the baroque, and the modern are juxtaposed. In this culture where architecture and art stand as evidence of the social, political, and spiritual events and values of the past, history is an irrefutable resonating presence.

Given these distinctive cultural and contextual differences, the perception of the function and meaning of "public" art is equally divergent. In the United States the criteria are determined by politics, whether the cultural fascism of the conservative reactionary Right, the cultural Stalinism of the "politically correct" doctrinaire Left, or the profit motives of the marketplace.

In Europe, where high art in the public realm is both an historical fact of life and a matter of civic pride, cultural traditionalists may opt for the preservation of history, while progressives rally for contemporary endeavors that will stand as tomorrow's history.

Salzburg, the birthplace of Mozart, nestled in the Austrian alps, is a prosperous, immaculate little city with the requisite medieval fortresses, numerous churches, baroque palaces, statues, fountains, squares, museums, gardens, a river with bridges, cafes, restaurants, and shops with fine merchandise. For most Americans Salzburg is synonymous with Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music.*

On June 29, 1991, Salzburg also became the site of *CityDream (StadTraum)*, conceived by two sound artists and composers, American Bruce Odland and Austrian Sam Auinger. The piece was commissioned and produced by SPOT Kultur and Veranstaltungs, a new organization under the auspices of the City of Salzburg. Director Ali Haslinger's progressive goals include stimulating and extending the local cultural scene beyond its traditional reputation for classical music, and "heightening Salzburg's international profile through critical and innovative projects" through an emphasis on contemporary art and the support of young artists. His argument is strengthened by the example of many other European cities in which maintaining a sophisticated urban cultural environment is seen as an essential part of economic growth.

CityDream (StadTraum), SPOT's first major commission, encompassed the air space of the entire city. Witnessed by at least 10,000 residents and visitors, it redefined the possibilities of what art in the public realm can be. A site-specific symphony of light and sound that explored the nature of presence, resonance, and history as consciousness, *CityDream* linked the past with the future in a holistic rather than linear form. Odland and Auinger's mind/body/spirit equation restructured the relationship between perception and understanding in a non-hierarchal manner. The result was a visionary work that invoked and reasserted the spiritual power of art through sensory experience without compromising its political essence or meaning.

To capture the essence of a city in an artwork that simultaneously inhabits the physical space of that city is a little like making the body the site of its own portrayal. What Odland and Auinger set out to do both literally and metaphorically was transform the city and its architecture of power into a "resonance room." The biography (or history) of Salzburg was re-inscribed upon itself in a condensed and transitory mode. At the same time the city may be perceived as emblematic of a European concept of reality; thus, self may be understood in relation to the larger sociopolitical entity. Central to European history is the dialectical struggle between church and state, papacy and monarchy, Christianity and secular materialism, which in turn dictates Western civilization's view of nature and human relations with it. In the twentieth century the same struggle is reiterated on a global scale between capitalism and communism, fascism and socialism.

The second dialectic is between nature and technology, the extension of self through which humans attempt to defeat the mortality inherent in nature. At the

same time the forces of nature are in the state-of-the-art technology that encircles the global village and is indifferent to the spiritual beliefs and political ideology of its users. What is fascinating about this piece is that while the artists acknowledge the characteristics of all these component parts and the oppositional tension between them, they simultaneously present them as aspects of a single organism. Thus the piece has a spiral structure in which the linearity of time is also circular.

Compositionally, *CityDream* consisted of a Prologue (*Nature/Man*), Act I *Church/State (Man/Society)*, Act II *Festpeilstadt (Society/Fate),* and Act II *Tuning (Fate/Nature)*. The symphonic orchestration of recorded and live sound sources was mixed by the artists in performance through a central computer matrix that controlled the output of six speaker systems whose spatial placement corresponded thematically with the architectural design and natural form of the city. The control center, all of the performers, and much of the audience, were located in Residenzplatz, a vast square on one side of the Dom — a great domed church that dominates the center of the city and its history. Speakers marking the east-west axis were mounted on the Post Office and the Residenz gallery that formerly housed the ruling Dukes and is now government offices, adjacent to the church. The hills were indeed alive with the sound of music. The north was marked by speakers mounted on Kapuzinerberg across the river, and the south by the Hohensalzberg fortress looming high above, and beyond the Dom. Drums beat, bells tolled, a Gregorian chant followed the path to the Vatican in Rome. Floating in the air around the fountain were high-frequency speakers held aloft by reflective silver helium balloons, from which wind whispered and a choir of angelic voices drifted upward. Sounds from below, history spewing from Earth's crypt, emanated from a wider ring of concrete cube speakers. This impressive technical production was made possible by Franz Seizer, Seizer Productions.

The Prologue represented the formation of a place, of natural resonances spanning geological time. Fittingly, for three days, up to only hours before the performance, Salzburg was drenched in torrential downpours of rain. The plaza was dark except for the brilliant bursts of fireworks illuminating the sky from south to north throughout the piece. Sonic explosions mixed with water and wind rushing through split rock. Echoing voices recorded in an abandoned water tank in Colorado chanted Russian Futurist Vladimir Klebnikov's sound language of the future. They cross-faded into the footsteps of a modern city, of street children in Brooklyn.

Act I evoked order and control under the governing reign of the Church Dukes from 400 BC to Napoleon's invasion, one of whom upon completing the great Dom threw a three-day party. Amidst the chaos of the Thirty Years War, a power struggle between the Catholic aristocracy and the emerging Protestant merchant middle-class, Europe's royalty celebrated in neutral Salzburg, center of banking and art. Johann Ernst Eberlin's 1742 *Tocatta II* suffused the city from the Dom's

great organ. A Fugue followed in circular paths. Suddenly the window of the Residenz lit up and thirty-one silhouetted dancers and a violinist in elaborate headgear suggesting kings and devils, danced demonic minuets. Sampled revelry and Leopold Mozart variations on Eberlin canons intersected as the music changed from sacred to profane under a bombardment of baroque fireworks.

The dramatic climax of Act II exploded into the modern age — control into chaos. The castle appeared to be aflame. Foreign languages traversed the plaza. Adrian Belew played a raucous electric guitar from the Church balcony where no one has ever been allowed before. A choir appeared in the east with stock responses — oohs and aahs emanating from the balloons and cubes. Banks of vertical lights illuminated the architecture like Albert Speer's spectacle at Nuremburg. Battling Belew, diagonally opposite on a restaurant rooftop, was the sharply punctuated German of actor Ferry Ollinger's rousing propagandistic diatribe against modern art. Amplified through an old military horn system, it resounded in Hitler's intonations. In 1938 Austrian Nazis burned books in Salzburg. Due to an unexpected power failure (technology at the mercy of nature) for several minutes Ollinger's was the sole voice as bombs burst in air.

The Third Act finale asked if it is possible to tune our world from chaos into harmony. Belew was replaced on the balcony by Gotthard Wagner tuning his violin. Choruses of birds, a technologically tuned acoustical mass including chords from *In Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, the *retuned* fragments from all the other acts, recurring like dreams cascading through time, plus the decaying resonance of colliding metal, huge pounding drums and finally, the melodic rush of wind and water rushing down the last wild river in the American West, circulated the city. Above us the thunderous unrelenting bombardment of fireworks lit up the sky, not like the Fourth of July but like nights in Baghdad, a paradigm of aestheticized terror. Simultaneously, just over the mountains, troops were gathering as fighting broke out in Yugoslavia.

Being in the midst of the crowds in the plaza under intermittent rain was like being in a time vortex in which centuries were condensed into minutes, millennia into hours, Earth time into the time of the universe. Though the narrative progression was loosely chronological, the perceptual experience was multi-dimensional, almost hallucinogenic. The composers' choreography of complex layers of sonic and visual material moved memory through space, interfaced non-synchronous time zones, and shifted dimensional perspectives.

At its core *CityDream* is about the nature of power, its edifices and follies, creative and destructive forces. The city was revealed as the projection of our collective consciousness, and art was the tuning instrument invoking a "healing."

PROPHESIES PAST TENSE

Commerce on the Edge: The Convergence of Art and Entertainment (1986)

It is common knowledge by now. The avant-garde has ceased to exist. It has become a nostalgic memory for its remaining survivors and former practitioners. A page in history for the generation that followed. A page turned at the turning point of the decade.

Performance art once operated on the edge. But Performance Art, I argued several years ago, is not a generic term. It is historically bracketed, referring to a specific body of work defined by a particular ideology and methodology practiced from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Like Happenings of an earlier era, the label is not transferable. Vito Acconci, one of its more notable practitioners of the early 1970s, recently referred to Performance Art as "belonging to a time, a time that made it possible." Performance Art was a romantic endeavor, a revolutionary art form that came out of a radical time. The times have changed.

In the 1980s performance alone became a more appropriate, more accurate descriptive term for the intermedia event, the interdisciplinary spectacle. Non-specific and all encompassing, it could be applied to any aspect of the many-tentacled dance, theater, video, audio, cabaret, hi-tech, star-studded phenomena of our time. Performance is the word of the decade, applied to every aspect of mass culture. Language collapses, disintegrates at the border, falls apart at the defining edge. Let's not confuse everyone by hanging on to the "art" part. Art is no longer art, and performance is everyone's way of life.

Art is an endangered species, an American buffalo, a Siberian tiger hiding out in the Himalayas. Or is it the other way around? Art is everywhere, commonplace and ordinary, prolific as cockroaches. Art is advertising, entertainment, fashion, decoration, and propaganda. Art is TV, and terrorism is "performance" at its most spectacular. As for life, life is a performance, an artifice, a simulacrum, sometimes

a little flat, a little one-dimensional, a little slow compared to the mirror image on the screen.

It is a somewhat perverse irony that the philosophies and goals of two generations of artists — from the Happenings, Fluxus, and Judson artists of the 1960s to the 1970s conceptualists and feminists — who espoused and attempted to practice the merger of art and life should bear such mutated progeny. How fitting that already Performance Art as a label has been appropriated by the mass media to describe work so diametrically opposite to what the term originally signified. We weren't paying proper attention. Warhol was the true prophet of our time. It is not the boundaries between art and life that have been erased, but those between the art world and the entertainment industry, between art and the media, between life and TV.

The art world has finally been embraced by mass culture and devoured. No need to storm the place. The inhabitants eagerly court, cavort, and cohabit with the mass bourgeoisie. Their rewards include having their names and faces displayed alongside movie stars, athletes, politicians, evangelical preachers, and TV newscasters in the glossy pages of the popular press who in return, report with equal relish on their clothes, houses, cars, eating habits, sexual alliances, and social activities. Art itself is a performance, the artist a performer, and the product merely another designer label commodity in the marketplace. If you have any doubts take a stroll through Soho, the K-Mart of art overstocked with bad overpriced reproductions.

The edge has been inverted. It lies at the center. The "cutting edge" is in the accountant's ledger. The discourse in performance is between the producer and the promoter. The terminology belongs to Broadway and Hollywood. The artist (now called the talent) is no longer an autonomous auteur. The artist is part of the system.

I recently came across a flashy Day-Glo red, silver, black and white promotional flyer from IPA (International Production Associates, Inc.) the newest power brokers in high art entertainment (sort of the CAA Creative Artists Agency/Triad of arts management). The headline reads "Serious Art Sells," underscored with "Smart art generation=untapped bonanza." The text talks about setting box office records with capacity audience turnouts of thousands in theaters, opera houses, and culture palaces worldwide. It talks high percentages and even names numbers. The descriptions, such original lines as "Not to be missed," and "Music with the power of dynamite," and "A magic unique in world theater," not from the critical art press, but from *Time, Newsweek, The New York Times, Washington Post,* and other major newspapers and magazines.

Who do these people represent? Stephen Sondheim, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Bruce Springsteen? No. None other than Robert Wilson ("Wilson comes home — it's about time"), Philip Glass ("The world has become a Glass festival."), Molissa Fenley ("If dance were rock 'n' roll, she'd be Sting."), American Repertory Theater

whose next season includes works by Wilson, Glass, Andrei Serban, Jo Anne Akalaitis, and Laurie Anderson. Also represented is Western Wind, a vocal sextet whose repertoire includes Italian madrigals, George Gershwin and Philip Glass, Le Cirque Imaginaire ("Rhymes with flair. A serendipitous blend of magic, acrobatics and vaudeville."), Japan's most famous Butoh company Sankai Juku and Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians ("visceral and immediate impact").

This is the jargon of the "industry." The new vernacular of art à la show business, or as they put it in the flyer "Serious Fun Worldwide" for an audience that demands "new culture now." We're talking big names and big bucks, fame and fortune. We're talking star talk and ticket prices for the well-heeled. This is the new establishment, the "cutting edge" at the center, art and performance in the Reagan era, the three M era — marketing, management, and media. This is capitalism at work. This is America. No European-style socialist-taint broad government support for the arts. Let's see if we can turn this thing into a profit-making business with a little wheeling and dealing Hollywood-style. Package it and peddle it. This is our national cultural policy. This is performance today.

Location is so diverse that it no longer defines the *context* in any clearly indicative way. The location is a theater — be it a little black box or large proscenium, opera house, or the Universal amphitheater. The location is a club — from slightly sleazy, often short-lived storefronts, to glitzy hi-tech discos. The location is the media — from local cable TV to PBS to MTV to *Saturday Night Live*, to listener-sponsored public radio. The location is the national network of non-profit organizations (formerly known as artists spaces). Performances no longer take place in commercial art galleries or museums, although a few of them still sponsor them under a performing arts and media program. Is context defined by the function of the space or who foots the bill? On the new map everything is realigned. Even the old issues of intent and context so relevant to identifying an activity as art in the 1970s have been voided and nullified by the 1980s circumstances of production, presentation, and distribution. The context is the art world or the entertainment world as a location for an idea. The two sides converge.

Consequently we are left with the matter of *intent*. Last year one of the directives on my students' contemporary art history final exam was to discuss the difference between art and entertainment. Most responded that it was a matter of purpose. The intention of the latter was to both "entertain" and make a profit. The audience was to be pleased — that is, it should have fun. Good entertainment might also impart interesting or important information, or it might just amuse. The purpose of art, on the other hand, was to communicate ideas and perceptions without consideration for their commercial viability or mass appeal. A few said that the question was outmoded, that the two were interchangeable. Money is the issue. Paradoxically, in the art world you often can't make what you dream up because

you don't have enough money, while in Hollywood you often can't make what you want because the people with the money don't think enough other people will pay to see it. You retreat to the sanctity of the art world where a little sometimes goes a long way, but not for long. Either way the audience has to buy tickets. Without an audience there is no performance. Tickets for a performance these days cost anywhere from seven dollars to twenty-five dollars, which is more than the former audience of artists, friends, and peers can afford on a regular basis, and more than a movie. So a new broader audience is sought. Understandably so! But it's not just economics. There is also the desire and the need to reach a different audience, an ever-widening changing audience — the audience that goes to Woody Allen movies, David Bowie concerts, and watches *Miami Vice*. How else can art have an effect in the larger world? Promotion is the name of the game. Without promotion there is no new audience and promotion costs money. Try getting gigs or grants without a slick video. See how far you go without an agent or management group. The art spaces are where you start, showcase, get reviewed, and develop a national profile, not where you stay. Performance is no longer a rowdy adolescent with a meager allowance hanging out in little gangs in the local neighborhood streets. Performance has come of age. It is another pop genre.

* * *

Having adopted Hollywood's methodology, appropriated its imagery, sought out its audience, what else is left for Performance Art but to move into its own house. The art world has become Hollywood's farm team. It is to the late twentieth century what vaudeville was to the early twentieth century, what Ed Sullivan was to TV in the 1950s. It can lead to bigger and better things. Like stardom. Like equal pay for equal work in the culture factory. From a tacky club in Alphabetland[1] you can graduate to the equally tacky David Letterman show. From art theater you can go to Broadway and on to the Academy Awards. You too can make it like Whoopi! (Goldberg).

Showcasing in the art world can be faster and more effective than starting at the bottom in show business. If you are a performer it's the perfect place to cut your teeth, develop a public persona and a following, get a gimmick and practice until you get good. The success of first-generation crossover talents like Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian have made the art world a hot hunting ground for new talent. Besides, in the art world you're not just another performer — meat for someone else's recipe — but the creator of your own material. Isn't that what separates the artist from the actor, for example? Isn't that why we call it performance *art*?

There is a new territory on the map. Its borders are unstable. It keeps changing. It hasn't really got a name. It has a lot of names depending on who is talking

and what language is being used. Eric Bogosian's *Drinking In America* and Lily Tomlin's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* are both in Broadway theaters a few blocks from each other. Both are soloists who perform a number of "characters" whom they have created. Both are social commentators. Both have a distinctive personal vision and voice, and neither appears to have compromised their material for reasons of commercial appeal. Their differences are those of style, aesthetics, and gender. Bogosian comes out of the art world. Tomlin comes out of show business. Bogosian calls himself a performance artist and is advertised in and reviewed by the *Village Voice*. Tomlin is not. Tomlin was the M.C. for the Arties, the Franklin Furnace tenth-anniversary benefit event at which awards (like Oscars) were presented for accomplishments in performance. Bogosian is a role model of someone who is making it on his own terms — saying what he has to say, the way he wants to say it. He's not selling out, just moving up. He's got the tiger by the tail. Tomlin is what many young performance artists aspire to, and few, if any, will achieve.

David Byrne and Laurie Anderson swim in the same stream — art entertainers on a mass media stage. The difference is that Byrne is a much better navigator, a more versatile artist capable of playing on both shores — high art exercises with Robert Wilson on one side, rock movie success (*Stop Making Sense*) with Jonathan Demme on the other. He makes Wilson more "popular" and accessible, while giving Hollywood director Demme "art" credentials. All of it makes record albums. Talking Heads sells David Byrne. David Byrne sells Talking Heads. He's money in the bank. He can call his own shots.

Anderson was the art world's first "crossover" performance artist to get a Hollywood contract, leading the way like an avant-garde drum majorette while others gaped in awe and envy. It wasn't an accident. It was a goal. She's a smart girl. Four Warner Brothers albums and a movie later, she's done concerts around the world, been on *Saturday Night Live*, packed them in at big time rock 'n' roll venues like Hollywood's Universal Amphitheater and high art venues like BAM's (Brooklyn Academy of Music) Opera House. She has arrived, but she doesn't seem to know where to go next.

In the film *Home of the Brave* she merely recycles herself for the record, running through it one more time for the camera. Like she says, "*This is the time, and this is the record of the time*." The surface is slicker than ever but it feels like the insides are missing. The message is that the sharks are everywhere. The sharks need to be fed, but how many more times can she rearrange and rewrite *Language is a Virus*? It's now as smooth as a milkshake.

Anderson, unlike Byrne, is stuck in mid-stream, caught in the crosscurrents, treading water. She keeps looking over her shoulder, kicking with one foot while the other is stuck in quicksand. Success has got her by the hair and ambivalence

is snapping at her bum. Her stance is full of mixed signals. The artist has one eye cocked at the pop star, but they're in the same boat! Her dilemma is a paradigm for Performance Art. She can't go back to that little town called Soho because it has been torn down and replaced by a shopping mall.

* * *

Where do you go when you can't go home? To the movies. The time is night. The scene is a downtown Manhattan studio. A young performance artist named Chelsea (played by Darryl Hannah) shows what she does to a rumpled Spencer Tracy-style D.A. (Robert Redford) who knows nothing about art. This mini-performance, complete with slide projections props, live and recorded autobiographical narrative text, music and choreographed movement, is not Hollywood's idea of a performance piece, but the real thing. It was created by none other than Lin Hixson, LA's leading exponent of large-scale interdisciplinary performance spectacles dominated by pop culture imagery. Her collaborators were Hannah, one of Hollywood's brightest rising stars, and associate producer Arnold Glimcher, owner of New York's prestigious blue-chip Pace Gallery. The movie is *Legal Eagles*. This big budget, star-studded film directed by Ivan Reitman (*Ghostbusters*) is one of the first major Hollywood features in which one of the main characters is a contemporary artist. The fact that she is a performance artist is fittingly ironic.

Hannah had read about Robert Wilson and others, and had seen Laurie Anderson's work and liked it. It was her idea to make Chelsea a performance artist instead of a painter. An astute move on Hannah's part! When screened for a test audience of several hundred post-adolescent suburban moviegoers, the performance piece rated as one of their favorite parts of the film. But from the generation that watches MTV that shouldn't be a surprise!

The Hollywood axiom being what it is — if something succeeds do it again and again and again, we shouldn't be surprised if suddenly everyone wants to have a performance piece in their film too, even if it's just a cameo. Unfortunately Hannah's performance and the juicy art world plot that gave the film its raison d'etre ended up as window dressing. No matter! Any day now producers and directors will be besieged with calls, press kits, and videos from all the hot arts management and booking agents in the business making pitches and looking for deals. Performance has been waiting in the wings for this moment.

The real irony is that Hixson and Hannah's performance in *Legal Eagles* looks more like art than many performances do today, and it is treated with the same seriousness as the great art that graces the walls — DeKooning, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, etc. — throughout the film. But that can't be counted on. Not everyone has Glimcher's sophisticated art eye and knowledge. Far from it! Just

remember, the movie business isn't really a business. It's a crap shoot! And performance is … just another part of the Industry! CUT.

***

Let's go back to the beginning, to the sources, to performance as public ritual, to performance as ceremony, to performance as spiritual and religious invocation, to performance as catharsis and celebration in a social context.

In an interview with Lee Breuer and Bob Telson, the creators of *The Gospel at Colonus,* in Los Angeles last December, Breuer stated that, "Recent scholarship has led us to believe that Greek plays from 300 to 200 B.C. were political/religious gatherings. They weren't entertainment at all…. Everything that became known as Greek tragedy came spontaneously as a response to preaching. The singing and dancing were spontaneous…. It leads you to understand how theater started per se. There was a shaman or storyteller or a religious leader who spoke out to an assembled group of people, they started responding… those responses go into the call-and-response tradition found in contemporary African music. Theater could not have been born any other way." Breuer and Telson saw a direct parallel in black American preaching and popular music — gospel, blues, and jazz.

Telson: "When you go to a black Pentecostal church the spirit is summoned through the snare drum, the back beat, the hand clapping the tambourines…. You grow up listening to pop music on the radio — Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett , James Brown — all of them came directly out of the church."

Breuer: "Black preaching is a very high use of the English language, very poetic, very musical…. It had already gained acceptance and popularity in the context of popular music because all lead lyric readings, all lead vocals are basically the same impulse that goes into black preaching. There's no higher expression of English… listen to what Ella Fitzgerald or Stevie Wonder or James Brown can do with a word."

By presenting Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* as a black gospel service, Breuer and Telson redefined its original context and meaning in contemporary terms. In *Oedipus at Colonus* "high art" and popular culture come together in a truly authentic transcultural form that brings performance and theater back to its roots as an unmediated experience. It speaks directly through the heart and soul of universal human experience emotionally, spiritually, and philosophically. Clapping, singing, dancing, the viewer becomes involved in a way that more closely resembles a member of a congregation than a member of an audience. It is a participatory theatrical experience, not a *spectacle*. It transcends artifice. Dare I call it *art*?

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Jump cut. The context is the Church, not simply as a place, but as producer and promoter. Now pan slowly to the right, to the far right, to performance as pop spectacle, to religion reinvented in the Hollywood vernacular as Performance.

Reverend Robert H. Schuller's million-dollar pageant *The Glory of Easter*, performed in his twelve-story glass Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, is the world's largest annual passion play. Christ's last week on earth from Palm Sunday to the crucifixion and ascension is recreated as a contemporary multimedia spectacle featuring movie stars, a cast of four hundred volunteer performers, a menagerie of animals including two baby leopards, a tiger, peacocks, goats, and donkeys that outdoes Rachel Rosenthal's *The Others*, and state-of-the-art special effects worthy of George Lucas. The staging combines avant-garde theater/performance with the Hollywood film epic. Imagine Max Reinhardt, Meredith Monk, Cecil B. Mille, and Steven Spielberg rolled into one and reborn.

A Jerusalem marketplace comes to life on a two story high, seventy-five foot deep, terraced set with a purple-carpeted runway through the center of the audience. Helmeted Roman soldiers ride down the aisles on horseback conjuring up memories of Charlton Heston, while Gregory Peck's voice narrates from Heaven via a multiphonic sound system equal to Lucas sound. "Extras" mill about the balconies waving palm fronds, and Jesus comes into town with his gang like a cowboy evangelist whose reputation precedes him. Surrounded by an entourage of adoring groupies, he struts, prances, and preaches like a cross between a pop rock star and an ambitious young politician on the campaign trail. Jesus is played like a media celebrity — the kind of guy who gets himself arrested for publicity value. In other words, he sets himself up. Pontius Pilate is played by Michael York à la Masterpiece Theater — a Colonial official of the Empire trying to administer justice amongst the squabbling locals and religious fanatics, rather like Mountbatten in India. Herod, the Hugh Hefner of the ancient world, is accompanied by a bevy of dancing girls decked out like Las Vegas chorines.

Mary Magdalene sings Jesus a love song like a cross between Linda Ronstadt and Barbara Streisand doing a lounge act. Then she provocatively throws herself at his feet, kneeling as she perfumes his body, offering herself to him. The girl can't help it. More than love it's an obsession — Calvin Klein's *Obsession*.

The crucifixion is basically a small town lynching by an angry mob incited by a few scheming elders who get the Law to do their dirty work. We've seen it before in a hundred westerns. This time it is updated by the splendid hi-tech effects — a virtuoso display of lighting including laser beam lightning bolts that snap and crackle across the Cathedral, followed by great claps of thunder. Jesus on the cross is lit up like an El Greco. Great clouds of blue fog roll in. Music from a fourteen thousand pipe, Hazel Wright organ is accompanied by drums, trumpets, and flutes. A singing Mary Poppins in angel drag flies through the air. The stone at the tomb is rolled away by an earthquake.

It all comes to a stunning grand finale as two sides of the Cathedral part, opening like the docking doors of a giant space ship. The crucifix is backlit à la *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and Jesus ascends to heaven in a shaft of green light, beaming up like Mr. Spock "*to go where no man has gone before*."

"*The world is a stage, the stage is a world of entertainment*." And *The Glory of Easter* is a spectacle in which opulent technology has replaced spiritual substance, poetic vision, and philosophical concerns about the nature and meaning of human existence. This is the world we are living in.

Where does that leave us in these cynical and decadent times? The art world is a suburb of Hollywood. Art doesn't live in the world. It's too expensive. Art is in camouflage, regrouping. It may be found hiding out under an alias in a lot of unlikely places. Even in Hollywood. Only don't tell anyone please! It doesn't want any publicity.

Performance / Media / Art / Culture

Selected Essays 1983–2018

Jacki Apple

Edited by Marina LaPalma

Experience interdisciplinary performance from the 1980s to 2018 through the eyes of one of its most compelling witnesses. Jacki Apple's *Performance | Media | Art | Culture* traces performance art, multimedia theatre, audio arts and dance in the United States from 1983 to the present. Showcasing thirty-five years of Apple's critical essays, the collection is a rich compendium of sharp-eyed and eloquent observations on the rise and diversification of interdisciplinary performance, how new technologies influence American culture and contemporary life, the interdependence of pop and performance culture, and the politics of art and the performance of politics. Brimming with big ideas grounded in concentrated reviews of individual performances, this volume offers current and future readers a rich portrait of performance culture at the end of the millennium.

Only a handful of writers have the intellectual chops, creative intuition, and vision of art history to speak holistically about performance art, but Jacki Apple consistently proves herself essential to the field and how we understand it. She digs into both the formal and the ineffable dimensions of performance with unmatched power and clarity without sacrificing honesty about the art and artists she clearly loves. Jacki stands in the evolving vortex of performance art so we can see its future.

Eric Gutierrez, writer/former Executive Editor, *High Performance*

Writing with deep historical knowledge, compassion and generosity, Jacki Apple is an artists' critic, always seeking first to reveal and then to celebrate the heart of a performance, no matter what the medium. Her fearless radicalism, tempered by a refreshing sense of humor, uncovers buried roots while also posing the most essential cultural question: how does this art help us understand who we are? I am particularly enthralled by the final section, Concerning Nature, essential reading during a time when ecocidal capitalism has surely reached the breaking point.

Gregory Whitehead, artist/writer

Jacki Apple's accurate, intimate, gracious, erudite and insightful writing provides a front row seat to an expanding cultural big-bang. This book is a gift to those of us determined to understand the who, the where, the when, the how and the why of the tectonic shifts that brought social interaction into the scope and insight of art makers. Her enthusiasm for the subject coupled with a commitment to her readers makes for learning more than history. She makes the history feel contemporary.

Conrad Gleber PhD, media artist/retired professor, La Salle University

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