Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics by Shannon Jackson (review)

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Shannon Jackson’s superb new book is, in a very challenging way, about vocabulary. Bypassing—even eschewing—language sometime dissed as “jargon,” Jackson forces readers to think and think again about basic terms such as “performance,” “social practice,” “art,” “politics,” and “public”—terms she calls “resolutely imprecise” (13). Her topic is ideologically committed artmaking that uses performance; her concern is the relation between such artmaking and the institutions that support both the aesthetic activity and the life it values.

Jackson leads with the reminder that, while leftists have encouraged a belief that socially concerned art is at its most purposeful when it is being disruptive, a disavowal of state support and social welfare systems can play right into the hands of neoliberalism. For those still convinced that the state is bad and the individual is good, she has this to say:

"The perception of autonomy is achieved through a kind of disavowal of the tax breaks, military pensions, public schools, wifely labor, housekeepers, off-shoring, and capitalist alienation that allows persons to believe themselves unfettered and individually responsible for their private success." (36)

And if the state vs. marketplace/socialist vs. capitalist/individual vs. collective standoffs are not challenging enough, Jackson throws into the mix a forceful reminder that artists and most audience members generally come to interdisciplinary work more schooled in the values and vocabulary of one discipline than another. Action, she notes for instance, is a relatively recently embraced tool for visual artists; for theatre practitioners, Brecht’s skeptical view of action as too conventional has been around for three-quarters of a century. What’s an activism-friendly artist (or viewer) to think? Judgments may depend less on one’s politics than on where one cut her arts teeth.

In six chapters of case studies, Jackson’s readings offer dialectical critiques of an international roster of artists’ socially engaged work. Chapter two, titled “Quality Time,” contrasts the work of Santiago Serra, who lives in Mexico City and enjoys an international reputation in the contemporary art world, with that of Shannon Flattery, who is known for her Boston-based community arts projects. Serra reworks Minimalist experimentation; Flattery meets with neighbors and collects oral histories as the nucleus of her projects. Both are concerned with people on the losing end of social services and legal rights, but is the work of one sophisticated and the other largely a “feel good” effort? Does hands-on engagement with disenfranchised people that is designated as art do more social good than displaying that disenfranchisement in a dramatic way via distanciation to an elite who are supposedly in a better position to take action? Might the answer depend upon who you are or whom you ask? Do institutional critics know best?
The most overtly feminist chapter, “High Maintenance” (chapter three), looks at works by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Martha Rosler to ask “why certain conceptual barometers prompt us to mistake their form for content[...], their explorations of redistribution as pleas for recognition, their re-enactments of labor as essentialism” (78). Rosler hit the charts in 1975 with *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, a video showing an ordinary woman in a confined space become one with the sign system of food preparation. Ukeles specializes in “maintenance art,” which puts the labor of cleaning front and center. Housework is little different from the janitorial work it takes to keep a museum going, and Ukeles turned both into displays aimed at exposing the repetitive labor propping up the putatively independent worlds of painting, activism, or even arts administration.

In “Staged Management” (chapter four) Jackson parses Andrea Fraser’s witty performances as a museum guide. Fraser’s work, emerging from her 10 years with the V-Girls, continues their tradition of staging institutional critique to show not just “the seams of acting, but [...] the seams of the art institution” (121), performing not only a character but that character’s context. The goal was “to reveal the institution to be less an object than a process, less static than durational, less a sculpture than a drama. It was to re-enact the recursive, mutually productive formation of an institution in need of repetitive action on the part of social beings” (125). “Welfare Melancholia” (chapter six) tackles performance art in “post-1989, ‘post-national’ nations” (188). Using several works by Michael Elmgreen of Denmark and his Norwegian partner, Ingar Dragset, Jackson articulates the slippage in the duo’s anti-bureaucratic works “between critiques of welfare’s instrumentalization and the dangers of not having a welfare system at all” (203).

*Social Works* offers constant reminders that neither audiences nor governments are monolithic. The attack that is pleasing to an international gallery-goer can be somewhere on the spectrum from illegible to irrelevant to offensive for the poor or unemployed or uninsured person it purports to support. Jackson’s book is an invitation to consume art promiscuously but to choose words as if the future of the world depended upon them. *Social Works* models that behavior.

— *Dorothy Chansky*

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*Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment.*


The severed, curving finger on the cover points the way. But which way? Backwards? Forwards? No. It gestures to the time of the now, again. To the now of the past’s fugitivity, a queer time that occupies Rebecca Schneider throughout her book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. The finger, like the book, indexes a time “out of joint” (1). Echoing her first scholarly monograph (*The Explicit Body in Performance*, 1997), Schneider brilliantly