Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics By Shannon Jackson Routledge, 2011 310 pp./$35.95 (sb)/$110.00 (hb)

Shannon Jackson's Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics (2011) embodies the coming-of-age of a mature, nuanced discourse on collaborative and social process art and performance. Write "art and performance" somewhat awkwardly here, as one of the book's central interventions is to interrogate the disciplinary lenses that frame some performance in relation to the history of visual art, and other performance in relation to the history of theater. We may be working in a postmedium condition, Jackson argues, but the innovativeness of a given practice depends in part on the media genealogies in relation to which it locates itself. Considering that disruptions to "visual art" often look a lot like "theatre," and vice-versa, Jackson seeks to interrogate "which medium is on the other end of whose 'post'" (2).

This double-disciplinary framework is complemented by an emphasis on how performance practices are a part of systems that exceed them. Although Jackson does not cite George Yúdice's The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era (2003), her book shares Yúdice's project of analyzing how collaborative and site-specific art operates in economic, political, and social systems to produce both value and meaning. Jackson focuses on the forms of interdependence generated by these systemic relationships. Performance both supports and is
supported by networks of agents and institutional infrastructures. The question of how those relationships are experienced returns throughout the book, as Jackson charts the ambivalent acts of "institutional avowal" at stake in performances and performance histories. The result is nothing less than a remaking of how we understand art's potential for social engagement:

[T]he "disavowal of support" was the illusory trick needed to create the effect of an autonomous work of art. Early twentieth-century workers' movements re-imagined the social role of art in heteronomous terms, whether in the appropriation of vernacular forms, the institution of social realism as a progressive aesthetic, the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, or the Constructivist re-imagining of the affinity between artistic labor and social labor. While we often remember these and other movements with a generalized vocabulary that celebrates art as socially-engaged, Social Works wants to remember the dimensions of this kind of work that induced infrastructural avowal, that is, that understood "heteronomy" as a socio-political but also as an aesthetic-formal openness to contingency, to experiments in not being privately self-governing. (31-2)

Jackson employs this idea of disavowal in order to examine several art and theater historians' discomfort with "non-radical" practices. For example, she convincingly argues that art historian Claire Bishop's evaluation of some artworks as critically trenchant and others as uncritically altruistic rests on the assumption that artistic autonomy and social intervention are contradictory, thereby enacting a disavowal of infrastructural support. In an American post-2008 financial crisis context, Jackson makes clear, the big problem with institutions is not that they will constrain our thought and action, but instead that they will not be there when we need them. Jackson's model of freedom is at root a Spinozist one: freedom is not something with which we are naturally endowed and that is encumbered by relationships of dependency; freedom is something we must collectively build. We must therefore imagine radicality and progressivism as not simply equated with anti-state or anti-institutional resistance, and must consider the support necessary both for art production and for the forms of life from which art is inseparable. This message has a poignant timeliness for anyone attempting to continue researching and teaching in public universities, while negotiating the rapid disintegration of the systems that support those activities.

Theater, Jackson argues, is uniquely positioned to make visible relationships of interdependence, because of its collective production processes and its already developed vocabulary for expressing support (such as the simultaneously material and semantic support of the prop). Jackson's choice of case studies is geared at the reinterpretation of work that has already received much critical attention: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Santiago Sierra, Andrea Fraser, The Builders' Association, Rimini Protokoll, and other familiar practitioners are all read in terms of the support their practices offer and elicit. These practices also become the occasion for highlighting the radically varied readings produced by different disciplinary frameworks. What is a prop for theater is a readymade for art; William Pope. L's crawling performances are actions for art history, but stumbles for choreography. The legacy of Bertolt Brecht emerges repeatedly as a resource that Jackson argues artists can draw upon or respond to in order to foreground their
own implication in the systems and institutions they critique. The book's strongest individual analysis comes in Chapter 7, which focuses on artist Paul Chan's performance Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (2007). Jackson argues that Chan's performance worked "to make 'responsibility' formally innovative" (228), by creating new networks that made the project's formal structure inseparable from the social and economic impact it had in post-Katrina communities. Instead of assuming discipline-specific knowledge on the part of her readers, Jackson writes as if she were walking both herself and us clearly and patiently through her material. Jackson's fundamentally pedagogical project opens two disciplines onto each other and thereby onto new audiences. Ultimately, the aim of Social Works' pedagogy is to enable and encourage still-to-be-written histories of social process art that are aware of the intellectual genealogies of their own inter/disciplinarity. Across the pages of Jackson's text, art history and theater studies appear bearing gifts for each other, thereby enriching each other's understandings of the forms of art and life with which both labor to come to terms.

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