Contemporary Theatre Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gctr20

Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics
Jen Harvie


To cite this article: Jen Harvie (2012): Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics, Contemporary Theatre Review, 22:1, 167-168

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2012.651916

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics by Shannon Jackson


Jen Harvie
Queen Mary University of London

Social Works looks at recent art and performance practices that turn to each other for support – art that is performative and performance that engages with artistic concerns such as institutional critique and qualities such as sculptural form. It explores this cross-media work in relation to social systems, demonstrating how recent trends in formal experimentation have worked to shift perception and to frame ‘the social stakes of that shift’ (p. 5). Shannon Jackson offers vivid close readings of art and performance by Santiago Sierra, Touchable Stories, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Allan Sekula, Andrea Fraser, William Pope.L, The Builders Association, Rimini Protokoll, Elmgreen and Dragset, and Paul Chan, and she considers social issues relating to welfare, sanitation, urban planning, and globalisation, and how they coincide with class, gender, race, and – especially – labour.

This book’s strengths are many. It shows how useful it is to think through theatre – its materiality, its necessary sociality, its multiple systems of labour, its still resonant theorisations by Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno – to understand better recent art trends as well as emerging systems of social and political organisation. As readers have come to expect from Jackson, she situates her objects historically and institutionally, illuminating how and why they function as they do; for example, Jackson points out that The Builders Association’s director Marianne Weems was not only long-time dramaturg with the Wooster Group but also long-time member of the pseudo-academic feminist performance group the V-Girls. Social Works models fluent interdisciplinary movement across theories of visual art, performance, politics, and the social, drawing on Brecht, Adorno, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Claire Bishop, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as on art histories of, for example, Minimalism, Readymades, and Institutional Critique. It attends thoughtfully to artists from a range of backgrounds and with a range of commitments, paying particular attention to gender, class, and ethnicity. It offers some great, detailed readings of several very important recent artworks, including Rimini Protokoll’s Call Cutta. Jackson is consistently and rigorously politically engaged, whether considering content, form, institution, history, site, or practice. Her writing is engaging. This will be a useful, enriching, and stimulating book for artists, students, and academics across art, performance, and social theory.

At its core, the book is concerned with what Jackson portrays as a current ambivalence to social support, which, she proposes, many consider constraining. (This proposal may be accurate in California, where she is writing; I believe it is less accurate for London, England, where I am and where the current Conservative-led coalition government’s massive cuts to ‘support’ across the spectrum of health, education, arts and so on have been widely and strongly protested by thousands.) Jackson does see the risks of support, for instance in the ways institutions putatively responsible for delivering support can function actually to damage rather than improve. By way of example, she cites how unequal support systems in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina made the latter’s effects so disproportionately disastrous for the city’s poorest communities. However, she also argues that disavowal of support is in some ways misguided, since support ‘remains key to sustaining public life as, in fact, living’ (p. 247). What could be clearer, for me at least, are the nature, sources, and sustainability of the support that Jackson values and which I will crudely call ‘good’ support, though she of course does not. As the
example from New Orleans indicates, at least some ‘bad’ support is that provided (poorly and unevenly) by state institutions. Jackson seems to infer that ‘good’ support can be found not so much in large-scale institutions as in small-scale ones such as kinship structures (which she sensitively emphasises include non-normative chosen family formations), art practices such as the cross-media (or mutually supportive media) practices she examines, and critical practices such as the cross-disciplinary (or disciplinarily interdependent) ones she forges across the length of her book. There is an impressive cumulative force in this argument given the myriad examples of such art practices and the consistent deployment of such art criticism that the book offers. In that accumulation, there is a strong sense that such systemic (if not precisely institutional) everyday practices may be more effective in their support because they are more pervasive and (in Michel de Certeau’s terms) more tactical than strategic (hegemonic) institutional support. Nevertheless, certain questions remain for me, such as whether all institutional state support is ‘bad’ (not least since the ‘institutional’ can collapse all too easily into ideas of intrinsically dysfunctional bureaucracy and/or demonised nanny states); how we ensure dispersed, tactical forms of support are pervasively and fairly distributed; and how we might improve state support since it might at least offer useful infrastructures for distributing support. These questions may remain for me, but I am heartily thankful to Jackson for indicating so many answers through the art and performance examples she explores and, most importantly, for making the fundamental case for support, without which such questions would be redundant and the case for cutting support would consider itself, disastrously, given.

© Jen Harvie

Devising in Process edited by Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart


Lib Taylor
University of Reading

Devising in Process contributes to a growing number of books on the process of theatre making that analyse approaches to contemporary performance and provide models of creative practice for students and theatre practitioners. The collection explores devising both as a methodology for creating performance and as a philosophy for developing collaborative working practices. It examines the rehearsals of eight theatre companies, all of which place devising at the centre of their work: The People Show, Station House Opera, Faulty Optic Theatre of Animation, The Red Room, Third Angel, theatre O, Shunt, and Gecko. Contributors to the volume were given access, to a greater or lesser extent, to the rehearsals of these companies, and this intimate engagement enables them to present perceptive insights into the devising strategies, processes, and methods deployed to develop innovative and challenging performances. Organised chronologically according to the age of the company, starting with The People Show, whose first performance was in 1966, and ending with Gecko, formed in 2002, the collection represents the distinctive range of practices, approaches, and guiding principles that comprise the wide spectrum of contemporary performance in the UK.

The introduction provides constructive contextualisation, locating devised theatre both historically and critically. It structures a frame for perceiving devising as part of the shifting cultural, political, and conceptual landscape, which aims to reconfigure issues of authority and meaning making in theatre. Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart then establish that company policy and structure, as well as material conditions such as funding and space, are central to the particularities of the devising process. They outline a broad trajectory for this process, and this clear framework anchors the subsequent chapters and provides structural coherence across very different styles of performance and critical engagement. Each chapter gives historical background to a company’s work and provides some reflection on the practical constraints, both economic and structural, imposed by current working conditions. No company’s work is discussed as emerging from a purely creative impulse; rather, the output of each is determined by practical issues such as funding, support in kind, space availability, responses to work in progress, personal relationships, and individual skills. At some points ‘family tree’ relationships surface between core company members and additional creative pools of performers and technicians who are drawn into projects.

The critical frame in no way limits the range of approaches that the contributors adopt for documenting process. Some essays take a descriptive approach, aiming to capture the texture of the developing progression of rehearsals and work-in-progress presentations: Tim Moss’s exploration of Faulty Optic’s Dead Wedding focuses on the detailed minutiae of the developing performance,