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Review of Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics by Shannon Jackson
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collective action, privileging instead distinct, and often conservative, interests. Doss prefers works produced by social activists that acknowledge legacies of colonialism, slavery, and genocide as irreconcilable, permanent tensions within our history to monuments that unproductively harness anger or that seek to provide a numbing emotional balm. Both books make riveting reading and invaluable contributions to the scholarly fields of public art, monuments, and memory. Read, or taught, together, Monument Wars and Memorial Mania complement each other beautifully by examining both state-sanctioned monumentality and vernacular expressions of collective and individual memory in a changing political context.

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NOTES

5 Savage, 152.
6 Savage, 305.
7 Erika Doss, Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.
8 Doss, 48.
9 Doss, 113.
10 Doss, 115.
11 Savage, 312.

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Shannon Jackson’s Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics tackles the topic of support networks, including local and global labor, technology, infrastructure, and welfare. Specifically her focus is on how artists in recent years have developed projects exposing the operations within, dependency on, and failure of these forms of support. There is yet another system of support, however, that Jackson exposes: academic disciplinary support. Jackson proposes
an interdisciplinary approach – although perhaps it is more accurate to describe it as a disciplinary relocation from visual art theory to performance studies – in order to unsettle a reliance on a vocabulary inherited from art history in evaluating social art projects. As a result, the same “exercises in reorientation” that Jackson identifies in her project case studies as provoking audience awareness are also present in Jackson’s overall study.¹

By crossing disciplinary boundaries, Jackson examines the familiar yet opaque terms that crop up when aesthetic practice meets social practice: action, collaboration, the institution, interactivity, the performative, relationality, and site-specificity. A desire to propose models of discourse for rather than clear definitions of practice runs through Jackson’s study. Although perhaps frustrating for a reader seeking answers rather than options, the study is nonetheless successful in advancing an alternative framework within which to approach familiar – and in some cases quite canonical – artists and works.

Jackson divides her study into two parts. The first three case-study chapters trace traditional art history genealogies, stretching from mid-century medium specificity advocated by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried (with the latter’s stand against theatricality looming large in the text), to recent relational practice theories by Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop. Santiago Sierra and Touchable Stories are presented as employing varied post-minimalist strategies of space, duration, and seriality to highlight the class politics of labor. Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ domestic and institutional maintenance projects are introduced as part of an early history of challenging an otherwise unnoticed continuity of everyday life. To conclude this first section, Jackson presents the trio of Allan Sekula, Andrea Fraser, and William Pope. L. They serve as examples of using “theatrically coordinated service” industries of production and consumption. These discussions of “staging” management are offered as an alternative to the familiar label of “institutional critique.”²

In the second section, post-minimalist genealogies give way to post-Brechtian ones. Jackson shifts her attention to demonstrating the applicability of conventionally applied theater terms to discussions of artworks. The Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll examine global citizenship, “staging technology” in order to highlight new re-localized modes of viewership while exposing the illusion of a frictionless technological world.³ Michael Elmgreen’s and Ingar Dragset’s installations focused on failing national welfare systems are discussed as enacting “a kind of touring-site specificity” and “site-specific heterogeneity”. Changes in presentation and reception at each iteration of their work expose the complexity of contemporary discourse around neoliberal policies.⁴ Jackson’s final case-study chapter examines the collaboration between Paul Chan, Creative Time, the Classical Theater of Harlem, and local New Orleans schools and cultural centers in presenting Waiting for Godot. After Hurricane Katrina exposed the
limitations of reliance on federal support, Chan’s project coordinated new contingent services. Looking beyond the theatrical production itself, Jackson presents the full nine-month organizational support system for the project as an opportunity to consider how extended durational service can complicate familiar binaries such as the aesthetic and the social, and the public and the private.

Jackson’s assignment of performance terminology enacts a process of transcontextualization for both actions and objects involved in her case studies. Questions of authorship and credit, often taken for granted in visual arts critical evaluations, are newly complicated when studied through the lens of performance theory. For example, mundane objects, otherwise dismissed as banal tools of everyday life or lifted into the art historical category of readymades, are considered as reciprocally agency-providing props. The individual provides meaning to objects through use, while juxtapositions between object, text, and actions defamiliarize and denaturalize reliant relationships between the individual, the object world, and the service world. Rather than dismissible as “extra-aesthetic”, the coordination of material as well as social exchanges becomes crucial in realizing the “social aspirations of socially engaged projects.”

Declaring “Performance turns up as a vehicle for exposing the non-autonomy of persons and the interdependencys of the world”, Jackson positions freedom as central to these projects. She is successful in proposing a model meriting consideration by those working in and with intermedial projects of sociality. In recasting Allan Kaprow’s Art/Life binary into Art/Support, Jackson meaningfully directs attention to the hidden networks supporting life.

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NOTES
2 Jackson, 114.
3 Jackson, 166.
4 Jackson, 198, 199.
5 Jackson, 16.
6 Jackson, 212.