Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics (review)

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Cohen-Cruz wrote this book as a response to a “call” she received while at a Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference in 2006, when, as she recounts, an audience member urged her to “write a book on a range of socially-engaged performance practices and how one decides which to use when” (11). This is a book for scholars, artists, activists, and anyone who wants to see the ways the performing arts can, and do, contribute to dialogue, community-building, and social change. As Cohen-Cruz says: “Such performances provide the opportunity to see a little utopia, something that doesn’t entirely exist in the world except as possibility” (16). Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response does just that. It opens up a space of possibility by situating community-based performance in an arena for further dialogue.

WORK CITED


Reviewed by Sonja Arsham Kuftinec, University of Minnesota

Shannon Jackson’s third book, Social Works, provocatively questions the limits of Modern Drama. Jackson’s case studies, derived predominantly from the post-1970s art world, seem at first to have little to do with either “drama” or the “modern.” Yet, Jackson’s study of aesthetically arresting social performances and their support systems, at the intersection of theatrical and performance art, illuminates the very grounds on which we perceive modern drama. Jackson concretizes this disciplinary situatedness in her prologue, via two performances of Beckett’s Rockaby. The first, attended to within a theatrical frame grounded in expectations of action, seemed, according to Jackson, to render the play’s iconic rocking and scripted pauses with painful slowness. Twenty years later, in a gallery context calling for more measured contemplation, the rocking seemed to Jackson “scandalizingly fast” (3).

Jackson’s anecdotal reflection also instantiates a rhetorical ploy, threaded throughout the book, of animating the socially and historically situated self. She appears variously as Mother, Daughter, and spectator, as well as public university citizen and scholarly interlocutor. Though the single-authored
monograph remains a mark of academic productivity, Jackson carefully iterates the support system of students, colleagues, artists, family, funding, and time that allows such productivity to materialize. Jackson’s generosity extends to her scholarly style. While unflinching in pointing up critical contradictions, she takes care to reflect on the conditions that produce such contradictions, to cite other perspectives generously (including those of the artists investigated), and to situate herself within a network of disciplinary practices and theories steeped in understandings of materialist feminism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, critical race theory, neo-liberalism, and labour and performance studies (among others).

Jackson locates her explorations of work in the United States and Europe within the “social turn” of “post-studio” arts and “postdramatic theater” (a phrase credited to Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2). Rather than accepting these terms at face value, however, she traces their respective genealogies. Jackson turns to the Frankfurt School, for example, to ground seminal arguments about theatrical modernity as well as to remind us of differing critical perspectives on Brecht from Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács. Brecht then becomes a theatrical touchstone for reconsidering defamiliarizing aesthetic tactics and resonant political theories of antagonism and rupture. Duchamp and his “ready-mades” serve a similar function as an art world touchstone of institutional critique.

Jackson’s main scholarly intervention, however, is to provide a critical framework for performance practices in which trajectories of postdramatic theatre and post-studio art coincide, particularly those that bring together aesthetic and social provocations. She encourages a rethinking of such provocations as necessarily opposed to civic support, deploying a vocabulary of interdependence to counter easy assumptions about artistic and social autonomy or simplistic renderings of power hierarchies. These arguments unfold over seven chapters, a prologue, and epilogue through vividly rendered case studies. Chapter organization models the book’s trope of interdependence, with chapters building upon and referencing each other, while each retains enough of the book’s core arguments to function semi-autonomously.

“Performance, Aesthetics, and Support” introduces key terms and arguments with a focus on “social practices,” theatricality, and the art world’s scepticism toward both. Particular attention is paid to the genealogy of “support,” as the discussion ranges from the function of the wall in museums, to backstage theatrical technicians, to Marxist base/superstructure models of economic analysis. “Quality Time” indexes arts-based social practices through debates around relational aesthetics and radicality in, respectively, the arts and community-based theatre worlds. Thus, Claire Bishop’s and Sarah Brady’s controversial articles about arts and theatre, respectively, are placed in relation to each other and to two contrasting...
social artists – Shannon Flattery and Santiago Sierra – who differently deploy community-based storytelling and embodiment in their artwork.

The next two chapters take up art works that precede the historiographically marked “social turn” in the arts. “High Maintenance” elegantly brings together feminist and materialist analysis to recount Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s performance of cleaning tasks in museums, which rendered visible household labour alongside institutional maintenance, eventually leading her to projects that foregrounded the labouring bodies of public sanitation workers. Jackson frames the chapter with a reading of Pixar’s 2008 movie WALL-E that illustrates how the process of rematerializing “garbage” provides a way into meditations on props, the transitional objects of psychoanalysis, and the “gendered asymmetry of the everyday” (89). “Staged Management” then traces the emergence of “institutional critique” via the theatricalized, class-based artistry of Allan Sekula in the 1970s, Andrea Fraser’s character-based backstage museum tours in the 1990s, and William Pope.L’s installations on blackness in the 2000s.

The next three chapters focus on case studies that render visible intersections of labour and public-support systems in social arts practices. “Tech Support” details how two theatre companies – Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll – foreground labouring bodies in the global tech support industry. The chapter details how each company – in works such as Alladeen and Call Cutta in a Box – links new media and theatre, staging the performance training of the telephone service industry, for example, while reflexively illuminating our and their dependence on various forms of technical support. “Welfare Melancholia” examines the public works of “Nordic queers” Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset through the lens of neo-liberalism. Jackson argues that Elmgreen and Dragset’s mixed media projects offer varying critiques of mixed-market economies that get taken up differentially depending on the geographical location of touring shows and one’s political and/or disciplinary orientation. “Unfederated Theatre” guides us through Paul Chan’s multimedia Waiting in New Orleans. The chapter examines how the varying components of a site-specific Godot, community interviews, and organizational mapping make sensible everyday existence as something more than “private.” The project also indexes key questions about artistic credit and disciplinary assumptions, as Chan labours to bring together organizers and theatre artists from his institutional arts-world location. Jackson argues that the project productively “unhouses” assumptions about artistic as well as individual autonomy in the evacuated landscape of post-Katrina New Orleans.

In each chapter, Jackson vividly evokes differing ways that aesthetically innovative performance projects illuminate our interdependence – our dependence on each other, civic structures, disciplinary apparatuses, invisible labours, backstage support, and global economic systems. Jackson concludes
her book with an epilogue on “Dependent Care” that not only retraces her primary arguments but also focuses on children in performance, meditating on how their dependence offers new perspectives on support and what it means to engage in the art of everyday living.

Reading through Jackson’s arguments takes time. It prompts contemplation. Social Works is that rare form of critical engagement that moves readers deep into the printed word and back out to lived experience and remembered arts events – recasting their sense of meaning in each location. It does what the best forms of modern drama and contemporary performance art do: productively arrest us in the act of living.


Reviewed by Samuel Dwinell, Cornell University

What roles has opera played in the history of European and North American culture? How can we best characterize the processes of change and continuity in opera performance and composition today? To what extent does the academic study of opera demand new modes of interdisciplinarity? These are the broad questions about opera and culture – then and now – that animate Herbert Lindenberger’s collection of essays in Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception.

The volume represents the culmination of over a decade of research by an acclaimed cultural historian, literary scholar, and author of two previous book-length studies of opera. Fully six of the eleven chapters in this collection have already been published elsewhere, including one in this journal. “I prefer to pursue variety rather than unity,” Lindenberger states in the prologue (4). Indeed, the essays exhibit a wide range of styles, repertories under consideration, and methodological approaches. Their collocation in this volume has the distinct advantage not of making any overarching argument about opera but of revealing the ways in which Lindenberger makes a case for opera studies as an interdisciplinary scholarly endeavour in the humanities. Opera is a form that “transcends the usual intellectual categories,” he asserts (2). This claim leads him to propose the institutionalization in the academy of interdisciplinary opera studies programs (263–79).

Turning to some of the individual chapters, essay one is, perhaps, the most successful. It approaches Giuseppe Verdi’s Il trovatore (1853) from many different angles in an engaging and enjoyable manner that would make it useful on the syllabus of an undergraduate course on opera. The