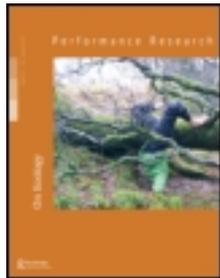


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Ecologies of the Festival. New York in 2012: COIL, Under the Radar and American Realness

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Reviews

Reviews Redux: The efficacy of the supplement

KEREN ZAIONTZ · REVIEWS EDITOR

This issue marks the renewal of Performance Research's Reviews section. Following rich discussions with Richard Gough and Claire MacDonald, I was inspired to bring the dialogical spirit of the 'supplement' to this revived section of the journal. The 'supplement' in scholarly and artistic works – whether it be a footnote, programme or curatorial note – is a mode of writing that speaks back to a given work. Moreover, the supplement takes multiple, paratextual forms and, as such, the Reviews section will report on a variety of texts and contexts including books, festivals, performances and archives. In addition to reviewing new books, we are also keen to explore the influence of canonical and out-of-print material. (PR 18.5 'On Duration' will include a review by Patrick Robinson of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* and its influence on theatre and performance studies.) The aim is to provoke discussion around key concepts in the field and, significantly, to rethink those concepts by casting a retrospective glance. Contemporary performance, and performance research, is often preoccupied with the 'new', overlooking the multitudinous artistic and critical sites from which it constantly borrows. Not only will 'old' books be evaluated, but 'new' voices will enter the fray. These new voices will include emerging and established scholars from around the world, but also contributors from different disciplines and historical perspectives (For the issue 'On Duration', Christie Carson will reflect upon her experience of attending all thirty-seven

productions of the Globe to Globe Festival at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.)

Whenever possible, the Reviews section will endeavour to engage with the special issue themes. For the current issue 'On Ecology', our contributors reviewed international arts festivals in the disparate centres of Adelaide and New York City and treated these festivals as performance ecologies. Sarah Thomasson situates the Adelaide Festival within an 'Australian festival ecology' that is increasingly becoming monocultural as state capitals compete (and programme) the same national and international productions. The Adelaide Festival attempts to stand out, and market the city as a tourist destination, by transforming the capital into a hyper festival state. The unintended consequence is that street and elite ecologies collide as racecar and symphony audiences jostle for prestige of place. Similarly, Sarah Bay-Cheng and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck examine how the city shapes festival culture and how the festival gives voice to the ecology of the city. They examine three concurrent theatre festivals in New York City and focus on how companies engage with emergent urban ecosystems including the Occupy movement, Arab Spring and the US housing crisis. Bay-Cheng and Parker-Starbuck demonstrate 'the tensions and connections between economic and ecologic nature' across the festivals they attended and describe how artists are left to stage (and grieve) the ruins of nature. Both these contributions on festival ecology mark what I hope is the (re) beginning of Performance Research's own ecology of the supplement.

Ecologies of the Festival

New York in 2012: COIL, Under the Radar and American Realness, in

SARAH BAY-CHENG & JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK

In our era of market hegemony, when rapacious capitalism seems not merely triumphant but unchallenged, these artists are carving out a different measure of value, of human worth. We, as a culture, have yet to create an eco-system that adequately supports these artists or gives the vast majority of their potential audience access to them.

Oskar Eustis (Programme, Under the Radar)

Trying to frame the cross-section of three international festivals that took place in New York City in January 2012 – Under the Radar, American Realness and PS122's COIL – through notions of ecology is a daunting task. Literally, the carbon footprint raised by bringing together companies from places as widespread as Italy, Japan, Argentina, Ireland, Poland,

Turkey, Germany, the UK, Croatia, Belgium, Lebanon, France and across the US is enormous. While 'economy' was perhaps a more thematic buzzword weaving through many of the productions we saw than 'ecology', these three festivals (as well as the concurrently running APAP [the Association of Performing Arts Presenters] conference) did form a kind of eco-system, as Eustis describes, in their relation not only to each other but also the larger events of the past several months, in New York's Occupy Wall Street movement and beyond. The format of the overlapping festivals and their content made clear that notions of economy and ecology are more interrelated than ever before, as questions of circulation, exchange and cost (both financial and environmental) in contemporary life saturated even the most disparate performance pieces. Throughout the festivals, performances reiterated themes of loss and absence, as they drew attention to a misguided nostalgia amid an uncertain future.

Often these absences were marked by and through (and

perhaps even the result of) media. *Let Us Think of It Always. Let Us Speak of It Never* by Every House Has a Door (Lin Hixon and Matthew Goulish, formerly of Chicago's Goat Island), for example, included both a reenactment of the Serbian filmmaker Dusan Makavejev's radical montage of Ingmar Bergman's films for the 1978 conference 'Bergman and Dreams' and improvised physical responses to footage taken from scenes of Viennese Actionist Otto Mühl's infamous commune in Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (1974). As performers verbally recounted the sequences from Makavejev's montage, they contorted themselves in positions described as the unseen movie clips of Bergman. In real time the actors watched a collection of laptops ostensibly playing footage of Mühl's group, with plastic flowers substituting for the body parts and fluids the audience could only imagine from the other side of the computers. Watching the performance, the audience never sees the source material, and even for those of us

familiar with Bergman's films and Mühl's extremities (in all senses), the performance highlights what we do not see, what we do not and cannot know within the boundaries of the theatre. Media here marks the unseen, the absences of performance, what the production points to as the limit of theatre. Fittingly, the play ends with two actors in search of 'where the theatre ends'. They exit, call back and return to see if they have been heard and thus are still within the theatre's scope. When they no longer return, the performance and the theatre itself clearly, if invisibly, has ended.

Similarly, Lebanese performer and video artist Rabi Mroué's works, *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003, revived within the festival) and *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012, work-in-progress), point to the ironies of documentation that purport to explain but in reality reveal little. Both lecture-performances focus on moments of unknowing and absence as the key moments of revelation in moments of conflict. *Missing Employee* tells the story of a Rafaat Suleiman, a civil servant in the Lebanese Ministry of Finance in Beirut, who may or may not be missing, who may or may not have embezzled millions of Lebanese pounds, who may or may not be dead. Mroué performs in the audience facing a video camera that projects his real-time image onto a television monitor positioned behind a table and chair onstage, giving the (somewhat) convincing illusion that he is sitting at the table there. Attending almost entirely to his image (although he is physically present among us), we are startled at the moment when his image appears, but the physical Mroué is now also

■ *Broke House*: Pictured Heather Litteer, Matthew Nasser, and Edward Stresen-Reuter. Photo by Big Art Group.



missing without explanation. In *The Pixelated Revolution*, Mroué questions media even more powerfully by considering Syrian protestors who record their own deaths via mobile phone cameras. Using harrowing footage culled from the Internet, Mroué considers the protestors' continued filming – even as the barrels of guns and tanks face the camera lens and shots mark the moment of death – within the language of cinema, specifically the Dogme 95 filmmakers and historical attempts to record death, as in experiments with 'optograms' that attempt to extract the final image from the retina of a dead body. Like *Let Us Think of It Always*, media in this context marks the unseen, the ubiquity of documentation ironically marking only the impossibility of knowing.

Elsewhere, as in Mariano Pensotti's *El Pasado es Animal Grottesco* (*The Past is a Grotesque Animal*), media marks the impossibility of remembering. Inspired by his collection of damaged photographs scavenged from a nearby photo developer, Pensotti constructs narratives performed in four distinct spaces on a rotating stage and using only four performers as all characters. The main characters – Mario, Pablo, Vicky and Laura – become entangled within narratives both familiar and bizarre, both in quests for new futures and attempts to recover the truth of the past. Pablo, for instance, finds a severed hand on his doorstep and in his search to uncover the secret meaning of the discovery, develops a perverse attachment to the hand. His most satisfying relationship is an affair with a woman missing her left arm. In narration by one of the other performers, we learn that when

Pablo puts the severed hand (kept in his freezer) next to his lover's armless side, he experiences a pleasurable sense of 'completeness'. Thus remembering – literally re-membering his girlfriend – he experiences the pleasure of fragments arranged into a satisfying whole. But, of course, such unity is temporary and the respective desires – to know, to confirm, to verify – are left unsatisfied.

Tensions between economy and ecology manifested elsewhere in the festival as productions variously explored notions of home. The literal loss of the home is addressed in Big Art Group's *Broke House*, a 'de-constructed' take on Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in which the house's residents – siblings Manny, Ri Ri and the unseen Olga, two drag performer/ interns and friend Jerry – circulate through the rooms of the house appearing and disappearing on screens while being filmed for a documentary. Playing on its titular pun, the show's inhabitants go broke as the house itself literally falls apart. The stage set – a wooden frame separated by cardboard, sheets and drop cloths making up four visible rooms off a central corridor – is physically disassembled by characters who themselves lack stability as they fluctuate among roles as actors, characters and stagehands. Also framed through media – a documentarian films the internal actions of the house – the production evokes multiple losses, of home, relationship, belief, amid a chaotic media-saturated environment. Forging a parallel to media coverage of the Occupy movement, *Broke House's* filmmaker documents the dissolution of home, family and nature: sister Olga is moved



■ Rabih Mroué in *The Pixelated Revolution*.
Photo: Ernesto Donegana.

to a nursing home; sister Ri Ri salvages pieces of the house and piles them onto a large snail-like shell on her back; only the skeletal former trees that make up the house remain. 'The trees may be dead but they had a purpose in life holding up this house,' a character laments amid the empty house, now in fiery ruins. As in Chekhov, a sense of nostalgia permeates this scene, but nostalgia for what?

TEAM's *Mission Drift* also plays with the construction and deconstruction of home in this musical fable that maps the US housing crisis onto the imagined birth and growth of Las Vegas. Two stories weave through the piece, foregrounding the tensions between those who live in the city and rely on the casino industry for basic material needs and those who develop the city, controlling much of the industry and building and imploding as they go. One the one side are Joris and Catalina, a couple of never-aging intrepid Dutch settlers, who over 400 years successfully deplete all of America's natural resources in a boom and bust cycle that reaches its apotheosis in Las Vegas. Left without wilderness to

explore and exploit, they satisfy their perpetually adolescent impulses on the never-ending creation/destruction cycle of Vegas itself, proposing ever more grandiose casinos from the dust of those destroyed. The housing crisis finds a perfect metaphor here in a depiction of America that is perpetually adolescent: energetic, optimistic, self-centred and inherently risk-taking.

Of course, these risks have consequences, which are not experienced by those responsible but by those working and living in Vegas. Against the story of Joris and Catalina is Joan, a recently laid-off casino waitress who struggles with the losses surrounding her childhood home. All of this is framed by a story of two brothers, Love and Wrestling, who alternately build up and tear down the land, and a central narrator, Miss Atomic, who represents the ultimate limit of human arrogance and American progress. As relayed by Miss Atomic, Love built up the Mohave and Wrestling used natural forces to destroy it. Finally, Love got humans to do this tedious and cyclical work, '[a]nd then he changed his name. To Steve Wynn', real estate developer of 1990s Las Vegas.

The production thus illustrates the tensions and connections between economic and ecologic nature. Joris and Catalina do eventually face the reality of a collapsing market when their plans for a new super casino (appropriately called The Ark) are halted by the withdrawal of funding (from Dubai). Both shows draw upon economic forces – stock market collapses, housing foreclosures – to show the devastation of lives as people are left homeless and jobless

in the wake. *Mission Drift* also stages a referential return to Chekhov through an ending that foregrounds the cyclical (and cynical) re-birth of progress and its inevitable destruction, as Catalina encounters a hopeful new settler accompanied by the stage directions: '*Lights Fade, the chopping of wood continues.*'

The link between economic and ecological devastation was perhaps most directly depicted in Cynthia Hopkins's work-in-progress *This Clement World*. At times both deeply personal and alienated (one of the characters Hopkins portrays is, in fact, an alien) Hopkins begins the piece as a 'live documentary' about her three-week-long Arctic journey taken through the British Cape Farewell programme. This programme, which brings together an impressive array of scientists and artists to found cultural shifts in thinking about climate change, provides a conceptual through-line for Hopkins's often quirky and idiosyncratic response to climate change. She merges both past work – her 'avant-folk' style musical characterizations depicting Native American rituals, for instance – with a documentary film that also reads as a critique of the myriad climate documentaries circulating. Her interviews with fellow travellers on the Arctic trip, for instance, are played as video of the scientists with Hopkins's own voice lip-syncing their dialogue. It's a clever touch, drawing attention to the ways in which political and issue-driven documentary filmmakers often ventriloquize their subjects. Although perhaps the least successful of the productions we saw, possibly due to the nature of the work-in-progress, *This Clement World* is an attempt, as

Eustis observed above, of an artist (and programme) trying to carve out 'a different measure of value, of human worth' amid capitalistic extremes.

Within these reiterations of loss, dysphoria and absence, it is perhaps not surprising that several performances throughout the festival drew upon the work of German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He was referred to within narratives (a character in Mariano Pensotti's *The Past is a Grottesque Animal* desires to be a screenwriter à la Fassbinder); emulated stylistically (*Broke House* introduced spectacular scenes from Fassbinder in the style of Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls*) and directly adapted in Jay Scheib's *World of Wires* (an adaptation of Fassbinder's 1973 television mini-series, *World on a Wire*).¹ Coming of age in post-war Bavaria, Fassbinder often adapted popular genres, such as melodrama, and deployed overtly theatrical screen compositions to articulate images of displacement, restlessness, and decay. His films repeatedly complicate notions of loss (the defeat of the Nazis clearly is not something to be mourned, nor are antiquated bourgeois gender roles, nor abusive marriages), but the feeling of absence and anxiety remains. Fassbinder evokes regret without nostalgia, absence without recourse. So, too, do the performances outlined here suggest echoes of impermanence and loss that, though poignant, are not necessarily tragic. Rather, the end of a powerful and powerfully destructive era may be best in the long run (one suspects that the planet will do just fine once we pesky humans are gone), but the end is rarely pleasant and never peaceful.

¹ While Scheib's production was not associated with any of the festivals, it was premiering at the same time at the performance venue The Kitchen.