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RISKING THE REAL:
PERFORMANCE AND REALITY ON THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN STAGE

By
JULIE A. JORDAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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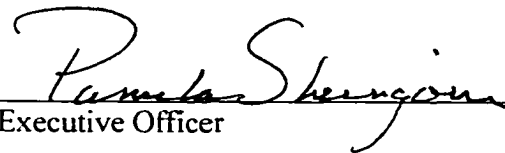
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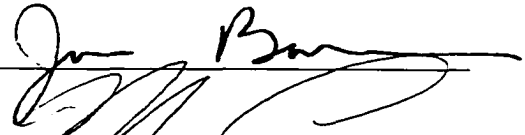
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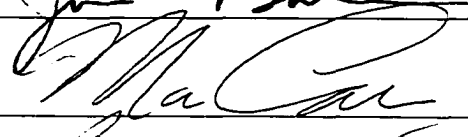
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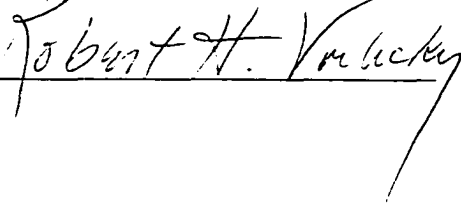
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Abstract

RISKING THE REAL:
PERFORMANCE AND REALITY ON THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN STAGE

by

Julie A. Jordan

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How have contemporary American theatre artists attempted to negotiate the boundary between reality and illusion? And how have their manipulations complicated the critical reception of their work? Using three important controversies from recent American performance, this project explores the ways in which material culled from real life experience has complicated the creation and reception of performance art, documentary drama, and postmodern dance. The case studies examined include the controversy over the defunding of the NEA Four, the debate over how best to characterize the plays of Anna Deavere Smith, and the well-publicized conflict between dance critic Arlene Croce and choreographer Bill T. Jones over her designation of his full-length work Still/Here as “victim art.” All three of these incidents evoked critical discussions on a national scale.

Ultimately, the controversies expose a number of deep-seated cultural anxieties about the politicized identities of the artists involved and the erosion of high cultural forms by the postmodern destabilization of categories such as art, experience, and reality itself.

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I have had tremendous encouragement from many friends, including Alisa Roost, Andy Erdman, Karen Michelle Mirko, Rachel Gholson, Wendy Maland, Dr. Ann Fox, and my colleagues and graduate students in the Performing Arts Department at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Sharon Green and Declan FitzPatrick read drafts of the manuscript and provided invaluable feedback at crucial moments in the project's development. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Rose Malague, who has provided good advice, practical coaching, and a sympathetic ear throughout the process.

My mother and grandmother have furnished endless child care over the last fifteen months, without which I could not have finished this dissertation. All of my family, including Ruth Bills, Jamie R. Jordan, Russell J. Jordan, and Brent and Amy Jordan gave me the courage to believe that this was worth doing. Without the constant support and love of my parents, Bonnie and Jim Jordan, and my husband, Declan FitzPatrick, I would have given up long ago. Their sacrifice has made my work possible.

My son, James Russell Jordan FitzPatrick, teaches me on a daily basis what reality is all about. This dissertation is for him.

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CHAPTER ONE

RISKING THE REAL:

THE PERSONAL AS PERFORMANCE

How can you tell the difference between reality and illusion? How have contemporary theatre artists attempted to negotiate this boundary? And how have their manipulations complicated the critical reception of their work? These questions are the primary inquiries of this dissertation, which probes the increasingly complicated relationship between fiction and reality in performance. Theatrical endeavor, traditionally caught up in the rhetoric and demands of mimesis and illusion, has consciously edged closer to the domain of real life. This mingling of real and fictional in performance has hardly gone unnoticed. In fact, in several important cases, the blurring of these boundaries has led to artistic, critical, and cultural debate of national proportions. As certain artists have learned, some aspects of real experience have proven critically unmanageable and culturally unacceptable when relocated to the realm of theatrical performance. Artists who risk the real in contemporary performance may do so at their own peril.

Using three important controversies from recent American performance as case studies, I explore the ways in which material culled from real experience has complicated the creation and reception of performance art, documentary drama, and postmodern dance. I am interested in the many strategies performers employ to authenticate their

creations by connecting them to the real, and the complicated questions raised by these performances. What kinds of performance have made the most productive and consistent use of real material? How do individual artists make decisions about the use of real material, and what do performers have invested in linking their art works to the "real world"? What are the various ways that artists, critics and audiences perceive the boundaries of "the theatrical," "the real"? Why do so many institutions seem to be interested in policing these borders? Which reality-based performances became the focus of wide-spread debate, and in what contexts? What are the implications of the success and scandal of reality-based performances for the contemporary (and future) theatre scene?

The case studies that I have chosen evoked artistic and cultural debate on a national scale. For example, controversy erupted in 1990 when John Frohnmayer, then Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, denied funding to four performance artists who had been selected by a panel of their peers to receive NEA grants. All four – Tim Miller, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley – are established artists who draw artistic inspiration from their own lived experiences, although they use real material in different ways. While Hughes and Miller typically stage personal stories from their lives, Fleck and Finley emphasize the corporeality of their performing bodies. All four, three of whom are gay or lesbian, deal explicitly with issues of sexuality in their performances, and foreground sexual identities and practices that confront the imagined heterosexual norm. Certain politicians and leaders of the religious right targeted these four artists and denounced them for producing art which they characterized as pornographic. A national debate ensued over the government's role and responsibility in arts funding, and the NEA

Four, as they came to be called, were subsequently used by right-wing activists as prime examples of the purported "degeneracy" of contemporary art. In the years that have followed, the National Endowment for the Arts has repeatedly come under fire, and ultimately Congress has enacted legislation to do away with all federal funding to individual artists.

Similar questions have occurred about the use of real material in the practice of contemporary playwrighting. In 1994, much discussion occurred over how precisely to characterize Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, the second major play by Anna Deavere Smith, after the play was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Smith, an African-American playwright and performer, is considered one of the most intriguing and talented contemporary theatre artists. Because she gleans the text of her plays from interviews conducted with "real life" individuals, her dramas have been hailed as compelling documents of the complicated "truths" of modern life. In the premiere productions of many of her plays, Smith performs all of the characters herself, representing many different ethnic, class, and racial identities. She has thus been lauded as a virtuosic performer capable of embodying the often bitter contradictions of American society.¹ Her playwrighting skills have also won many accolades, including an Obie award and one previous Pulitzer nomination.² To the surprise of many, the Pulitzer committee subsequently withdrew Twilight from consideration, claiming that because she used

¹ The solo performance aspect of Anna Deavere Smith's work makes her an interesting connection to the NEA Four.

² Smith's play Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities (New York: Anchor Books, 1992) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

interviews as the basis of her text, the play did not represent a "work of the imagination."³

Smith was devastated by the committee's refusal to acknowledge her authorship of the piece, and reiterated that she considered herself a playwright, not a journalist. The committee did not relent, choosing to use Smith's documentary text as evidence which disqualified the play from artistic consideration.

Near the end of 1994, yet another debate erupted over the use of real material in artistic creation. This one surrounded the premiere of Still/Here, a dance created by prominent choreographer Bill T. Jones and based on the experiences of individuals with life-threatening illnesses. Jones conducted months of workshops with various survivor groups around the country. He used videotape of the workshops and the movements created within them in the design of Still/Here, and his process was widely publicized prior to the opening of the piece. The controversy began when Arlene Croce, a preeminent dance critic, brutally attacked the dance in The New Yorker, although she had not actually seen the performance.⁴ In her article, Croce professes to having no need to see the piece in order to review it. In fact, she claims that the choreographer's intentions and methods create a piece which defies any meaningful criticism and displays the woeful condition of the arts. She cites the piece as a prime example of what she calls "victim art," which replaces formalist integrity with the sentimental and unmediated communication of whatever social or personal tragedy has been visited upon the artist. Her article elicited a flurry of responses, with everyone from Richard Schechner to Camille Paglia engaged in

³ See Sean Mitchell, "The Tangle Over Twilight," The Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1994, Sec Cal 7, 48-49.

⁴ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," The New Yorker, 26 December 1994, 54-60.

the debate. Many critics came to Croce's defense and lashed out against the so-called victim artists. Tellingly, one of the primary descriptors of victim art was that it made use of real material from the artist's life or experiences. Although the tensions and preoccupations manifested by Croce's article were by no means without precedent, the victim art controversy brought long-standing artistic and political differences to a head, and played them out in a national forum.

In each of these case studies, the reception of the artwork was complicated and potentially disrupted by the respective artist's use of real material, in spite of the fact that the artists use different kinds of real material to create their performance texts. The NEA Four, like many other performance artists, draw on autobiographical material from their lives and/or emphasize their real bodies on stage.⁵ Documentary drama, on the other hand, does not rely on the notion that the performer on stage has personally experienced the events he or she relates, but rather that the text which is spoken was generated in some other, non-theatrical (i.e., real) place, and transposed into the theatre. Postmodern dance, which provided the backdrop for the victim art controversy, often incorporates autobiographical text and/or quotidian, "non-specialized" action.⁶ The artists under consideration variously tell their life stories, celebrate their corporeal bodies, rely on authentic (found) language, incorporate multi-media documents of real-life experiences, or use some combination of these strategies to create their art. They all, however, use this

⁵ See Mark Russell, ed., Out of Character: Rants, Raves and Monologues from Today's Top Performance Artists (New York: Bantam, 1997); and Leonore Champagne, ed., Out From Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990).

⁶ See Sally Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

real material to challenge traditional assumptions about such categories as race, gender, ability, life, death, sexuality, art and criticism. These probing questions, more than the real material per se, lead to the critical controversy surrounding each work.

Each of the case studies I provide explores the vexed critical reception of reality-based art in a prominent performance genre. In each, anxiety which purported to be about the inclusion of real material allowed a traditional critical community to withhold some aspect of endorsement or reward. The established critical community found the inclusion of real material a reason to exclude the artworks in question from full consideration as art. In performance art, for example, the emphasis on and celebration of the bodies and real-life stories of the queer artists allowed mainstream critics to call the work “pornography,” and withhold grant money on that basis. Smith’s play is ineligible for the Pulitzer because its use of found text means that it is not art, it is journalism. And Croce wields her critical power and withholds her review (which can be seen as a critical acknowledgment of art status) because Jones’s use of actually sick individuals means that Still/Here is not concert dance, it is social work. Each of these artists was denied some aspect of cultural acknowledgment by a critical establishment which chose to focus on their manipulation of real material.

Nevertheless, the critical anxiety over this work suggests a great discomfort not just with the artists’ methods, but with their messages. The critical refusal to fully embrace these artists stems more from a pronounced discomfort with the non-traditional stories, bodies, and ideas the artists present than with any true concern over formal artistic criteria. It is not a random coincidence that each of the artists I discuss represents one (or more) disenfranchised identity positions. The artists who became the subject of the

controversies were not traditional straight, white, well-educated men. They are variously gay, lesbian, feminist, African-American, and HIV-positive. Their use of real material is troubling to some mainstream critics not only because it threatens to dilute the artistic purity of various high art categories, but because it documents lives, bodies and experiences which fall outside the accepted heterosexual, able-bodied norm. These case studies allow an investigation of the larger theoretical and artistic concerns which underlie each particular discussion, including the continued effects of sexism, racism and homophobia on the arts.

Presence and Performance

I believe that theatre holds particular promise for an investigation of the creative potential and possible risk of the use of real material in art. The tension between the real and the simulated has been the subject of much energy in contemporary critical inquiry. Sally Banes speaks to the increasing difficulty of maintaining a grip on reality in our contemporary technological age, and of theatre's unique role in postmodern society: "As everyday life itself becomes more and more fantastical, more involved with role playing, game skills, and the mastery of complex media and technologies, theatre becomes the space where that knowledge and skill is tested, shared, and intensely layered."⁷ Banes suggests that in an increasingly mediatized world, theatre holds out the promise of the real, of shared interaction between performer and audience. This promise of real interaction evokes the theatre's potential to effect social change for the performers and

⁷ Sally Banes, "Will the REAL . . . Please Stand Up," *TDR* 34, no. 4 (Winter 1990) : 23.

audience, a promise which has attracted many artists interested in challenging the conditions modern life. Many find the concept of theatrical presence to hold particular potential for a re-examination of social paradigms.

Of course, many other performance scholars have come to question the notion that presence, in and of itself, affords the possibility of progressive social change. One of the most important is Philip Auslander, who addresses this much-debated issue at length in From Acting to Performance (1997) and Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture (1999). Auslander questions the assumption that “one living being before others is spiritually and psychologically liberating” in light of a post-structuralist critique of the relationship between presence and authority: “This assumption no longer seems tenable in light of the suspicion that has been cast upon the whole notion of presence” He goes on to point out that this rejection of the idea that presence is inherently liberating stems from a postmodern awareness of the “collusion between presence as charisma or salesmanship and repressive power structures.”⁸ He develops this theme in Liveness, in which he challenges performance scholars to acknowledge the imbrication of performance in mediatized culture: “It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.”⁹ Auslander rejects the binary opposition between live and mediatized which is based on an ontological opposition between presence (performance) and absence (reproduction). Nevertheless, he also concedes that “even within our hyper-

⁸ Philip Auslander, From Acting To Performance (London: Routledge, 1997), 62, 63.

⁹ Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London: Routledge, 1999), 40.

mediatized culture, far more symbolic capital is attached to live events than to mediatized ones, at least for the moment.”¹⁰ His admission acknowledges the seductive appeal of presence even in our hyperreal postmodern moment. Although theoretical and material questions about theatrical presence persist, performance continues to offer an experience of collective presence unlike any other in contemporary culture.

The appeal of the presence of live performance, particularly the avant-garde performances under consideration here, speaks to our cultural preoccupation with the real. Peggy Phelan addresses the relationship between the real and performance directly in Unmarked: “Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies.”¹¹ Phelan argues that physical embodiment resists reproduction in what she calls the “balanced circuits of finance,” and claims that this resistance is key to understanding the quintessential character of performance. She repeatedly points out, however, that this “implication of the real” is complicated by the deceptively readable quality of visibility, especially when it comes to reading matters of race, sexuality and gender on the performing individual.¹²

Phelan's remarks speak to the cultural anxiety evoked by the performances in question. Attempting to read the real material used in the performances as a kind of transparent conduit to authentic experience, or authentic identity, is inherently frustrated by the failure of the real to satisfy our collective cultural desire to determine the absolutes of race, of experience, of the body. In Unmaking Mimesis, Elin Diamond recognizes the

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

¹¹ Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993), 148.

¹² Ibid., 10.

complicated notion of experience and the body in relation to performance: “The body’s emphatic ‘live’ presence is offered as a momentary habitus of what is not present – the forgotten objects and cultural detritus that constitute a piece of the ‘historical experience of women.’”¹³ Diamond's remarks suggest an ironic situation for the human body in performance, a body that is incontrovertibly real, yet can only be read and understood as a stand-in for “invisible” cultural meanings. This body, which is paradoxically the quintessential requirement for live performance, is at once the comforting reassurance of the authenticity of experience and the omnipresent threat that art will exceed its frame. Theatre, then, provides the best opportunity for exploring these complicated questions about reality and art, fixed, as it is, in the bodies of the performer and the audience.

Feminism and Reality

Many of these same questions have challenged contemporary feminist artists and theorists who would use theatre to challenge the status quo. Feminist theory and practice has played an important role in the development of personal performance and my own scholarly methods. Feminism provides important strategies for examining the works of and cultural responses to artists disenfranchised by traditional theatrical and critical discourses. Tellingly, all of the artists involved in the primary case studies of this project occupy sexual, racial, and/or gender identity positions historically excluded from mainstream theatre. Feminist theatre practitioners were crucial to the development of the personal performance strategies which allowed these and other artists a voice. Many

¹³ Elin Diamond, Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater (London: Routledge, 1997), 150.

scholars have noted the important roles which feminism and feminist theatre have played in the increasing prevalence of personal performances in the last few decades.¹⁴ Charlotte Canning, author of a recent critical history of the early work of feminist theatre collectives, takes the emphasis on personal performance as one her themes. She repeatedly points out that feminist politics and feminist theatre groups were convinced of the efficacy of emphasizing real experience: "Feminists believed that obscuring what women experienced was, in a large part, how women's oppression operated. [Feminist] theatre also participated in this investment by producing texts and performances that were occasionally autobiographical, often based in improvisation, and usually based on events and information gathered from real women's lives."¹⁵ From the outset, feminist artists consciously chose to use real material in their performance projects, whether by staging stories from the actors' or audience's lives or focusing the spotlight on the lived experiences of the female body. Feminist theatre collectives such as the Women's Experimental Theater and At The Foot Of the Mountain were key in recognizing the artistic representation of the real as an important strategy to effect social change.

However, as Diamond points out, this focus raises questions about the uncritical portrayal of experience as universal truth: "Mention of experience itself recalls us to a thorny debate in feminist theory, between radical feminist visions of the irreducibility of

¹⁴ See Henry M. Sayer, The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Marvin Carlson, Performance: A Critical Introduction (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁵ Charlotte Canning, Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.: Staging Women's Experience (London: Routledge, 1996), 39. Canning provides extensive analysis of important feminist theatre collectives like the Women's Experimental Theater, Lillith, At the Foot of the Mountain, and Spiderwoman Theater.

embodied female experience and the poststructuralist critique of experience as a self-authenticating, stable marker of knowledge and truth . . . The narrative ‘I’ has been a staple of feminist performance art since the 1970’s, a means of inciting the expectation of narrativity only to displace it.”¹⁶ Diamond refers to an important tension in critical discourse, where the post-structuralist destabilization of the speaking subject threatens to undermine those aspects of feminist activity which have relied on personal agency for political efficacy.

This study works within this tension, where the authentic self of personal performance is brought into question by the complicated questions of post-structuralism. Contemporary artists who stage real material have learned much from feminist artists like Roberta Sklar, Claire Coss, Sondra Segal, Megan Terry, the Lillith collective, Split Britches, and Spiderwoman Theater and critics such as Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, Lynda Hart, Peggy Phelan, and Elin Diamond, among others, who have struggled to define an art which would privilege female experience without pretending to offer a universalizing account of women’s lives and opinions. Feminist theatre practice, with its tendency to focus on the lives and experiences of real women, is an extremely important part of the context for these debates. Many of the artists who rely on various kinds of real material in their work have found that their artworks are inherently part of the “personal is political” rhetoric, regardless of the more or less explicit feminist intentions of their work.

Of course, feminist artists from the twentieth century did not invent the idea of incorporating real materials into theatrical art. In his article on “Performing the Self,” Marvin Carlson points out: “Autobiographical performance was certainly not unknown

¹⁶ Diamond, 148, 152.

in earlier periods . . . Actors appearing as themselves on stage can in fact be traced far back in theatre history, and not simply in the common and familiar practice of providing prologues and curtain speeches."¹⁷ Innumerable contemporary performance artists, playwrights, and dancers consciously employ documentary or real material in their work, and it is important to recognize that these standout cases do not exist in a vacuum.¹⁸ But the cases I have chosen – the defunding of the NEA Four, the performances of Anna Deavere Smith, and the controversy over victim art – merited an unusual amount of mainstream media coverage. The debates over the value, merits, and character of these particular works have directed an enormous amount of attention to the performance community, bringing national focus to a realm of creative activity which often goes unnoticed in comparison with the much higher profile worlds of film and television.

This project focuses on those occasions of American performance when intersections between theatrical production and real life material generate enough discursive energy to enliven the national debate. The number of (sometimes contradictory) accounts of any given performance is therefore quite large. Rather than attempting to reduce the reading of these complicated situations to a single position, I rely

¹⁷ Marvin Carlson, "Performing the Self," *Modern Drama* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1996) : 599.

¹⁸ Out of many choices, the following books offer a broad historical survey of contextual artists from each of my chosen forms. On performance art, see RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988); on documentary drama, see Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of its Content, Form and Stagecraft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); on postmodern dance, see Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994). See also Steven Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (London: Routledge, 1992) for a general history of controversial contemporary art.

on Roland Barthes's post-structuralist concept of a text as a "tissue of quotations" produced by "innumerable centers of culture."¹⁹ In each chapter, I attempt to explore the various "cultural centers" which make meaning in these debates. My discussion is therefore first of all grounded in the actual performance events, and includes the documentation and critique of these key performances, providing adequate description of the process and product of each artist. However, it is also necessary to investigate the meanings these productions evoked in the context of their critical and popular reception. I therefore pay close attention to the responses to the works in the popular and academic press. Since the particular cases I have chosen each generated a great deal of critical energy and response, examining this dialogue is crucial to understand how each performance troubled the notion of theatrical creation, the category of real experience, or both. The articles written in response to the respective performances, articles which reached a far greater audience than the performances themselves, provide important clues to understanding each controversy and the underlying themes and connections between them. These documents made it possible for scores of people (including politicians) who had never seen the performances to engage in the debates. I am interested in examining the mass media responses as documents themselves and as important forces in shaping the experience of the spectator and generating 'real-world' understandings of the art.

In some ways, then, this project is a kind of discourse analysis of particular moments in contemporary performance history. It is my contention that the discourse surrounding these events is an intrinsic part of their received social meaning. John Fiske

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

addresses the concept of “discourse” in his book Media Matters in terms which emphasize the interrelated structure of linguistic systems of meaning: “Discourse, then, is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its user; it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community.”²⁰ Of particular interest here is Fiske’s citation of the “power-bearing” quality of discourse, especially in light of the real world consequences that many of the critics who responded to the art works were able to achieve. Power is active everywhere in the rhetoric which surrounded these artistic moments. Fiske succinctly parses the relationship between power and discourse: “Discourse does not represent the world; it acts in and upon the world.”²¹ The mainstream critical responses to each piece permeate the cultural imagination of the work and the artists involved, prompting Michal Kobialka to ask, “Is it possible to watch Bill T. Jones’s Still/Here without being aware of the stigma of victim art?”²² Kobialka’s question indicates the extent to which the critical discussion of these works informs all subsequent understandings of the art and points to the value of the poststructuralist emphasis on meaning as the product of many competing discourses for this study.

These particular cases were the ones that were thrust into the national spotlight, and have therefore come to represent contemporary performance to the nation. The

²⁰ John Fiske, Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

²¹ Fiske, 5.

²² Michal Kobialka, “Introduction: Of Borders and Thresholds,” in Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice and Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

debates often landed the subjects in the pages of the popular press and even in mass media outlets like news reports and talk shows. The publicity and exposure for the artists involved raises questions both about the efficacy of performance as it moves beyond its immediate live audience context and the use-value of mass media exposure for performance events. These events are important for this study precisely because their exposure in the national media raises important questions about broader political, social and artistic issues, including the perilous and complicated questions of funding and censorship. The idea that there is no such thing as bad publicity becomes questionable, especially in light of the NEA's blanket de-funding of individual artists, an action which can be seen as a direct response to the public debate.

Performance Art: The Authentic Experience

The personal is never more overtly political than in performance art, with its dual emphasis on the autobiographical and bodily experiences of the artist. This strategy is particularly important as it has been used to create a performance text of some political efficacy. Some of these art works, especially those which challenge traditional notions of gender, race and/or sexuality, have incurred the scrutiny of both politicians and the mass media audience. My first chapter, "Get Real: Stories, Bodies, and the NEA" unravels the complicated issues of personal performance, public response, and government funding as they have collided within the genre of solo performance art.

With the emergence of the genre loosely categorized as performance art in the sixties and seventies, artists would often incorporate elements of reality into their work.²³

²³ See Sally Banes, Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the

One of the important and influential performance styles of the era was Happenings, about which Michael Kirby has written: "Happenings have contributed their share to the creation of a state of mind that values the concrete as opposed to the pretended or simulated and that does not require plots or stories."²⁴ These art works display not only the emphasis on real materials and actions, but also point towards the resistance to textual narrative characteristic of early performance art. Performance art as it came to be known is often seen as primarily arising from the decades of visual art production which preceded the development of performance art as a genre per se.²⁵ Early performance works, such as those by Allan Kaprow, Richard Kostelantz, and the Fluxus collective demonstrated this suspicion of narrative text and a concurrent emphasis on the visual.²⁶

However, as the 1980's progressed, the focus of performance art shifted from the overtly visual to the personal, as described by Carlson: "[T]he initial emphasis on body and movement, with a general rejection of discursive language, has given way gradually to image-centered performance and a return of language . . . Solo performance, though still built upon the physical presence of the performer, relies heavily upon the word, and very often upon the word as the revelation of the performer, through the use of autobiographical material."²⁷ The early attempts to interrogate the boundaries between reality and performance have gradually shifted to an emphasis on the lived experience of

Effervescent Body (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

²⁴ Michael Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," in Acting (Re)considered: Theories and Practices, ed. Philip Zarilli (London: Routledge, 1995), 56-57.

²⁵ See Goldberg.

²⁶ See Carlson, Performance, 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

the performer and the performing body's ability to re-present autobiographical, identity-based information. The result has been an enormous upsurge in the number of solo performers.

There are several artists whose work is cited repeatedly by various scholars as influential on the development of solo performance as an art form. For example, Carolee Schneemann is often mentioned as an influential solo artist who made important innovations in both feminist theatre and the performance of the body in works such as "Meat Joy" (1964) and "Interior Scroll" (1975).²⁸ The controversial work of Chris Burden, including "Shoot" (1971) and "Through the Night Softly" (1973) involved (in some cases, death-defying) acts of personal deprivation and mutilation.²⁹ Performances by Rachel Rosenthal such as "Rachel's Knee" (c1975) and "My Brazil" (1970) were among the early works to bring personal narrative to creative expression.³⁰ Rosenthal's work is also relevant to this discussion because Rosenthal was one of a small percentage of artists who refused to accept an NEA grant after the defunding of the NEA Four.³¹

In undertaking an examination of the NEA controversy, it is important to become familiar with the history of the often-strained relationship between the US government and the arts. Milton C. Cummings has pointed out that unlike most European countries,

²⁸ See Sayer, The Object of Performance, and Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (London: Routledge, 1997).

²⁹ Described in Goldberg, Performance Art, and Sayer, The Object of Performance.

³⁰ See Suzanne Lacy, ed., Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

³¹ Rachel Rosenthal, "Rosenthal Looks a Gift Horse in the Mouth," TDR 35, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 13-16.

the United States has only been systematically funding its artists since 1964, when the first NEA grant was awarded to the American Ballet Theatre.³² The National Endowment system previously allowed individuals and organizations to apply for the grants. The applications were subsequently reviewed by a peer panel, which was a committee of artists who were considered experts in the applicant's genre. Over the years, this has led to an impressive list of recipients from all manner of the arts, including: Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp, John Irving, Alice Walker, Nam June Paik, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, and the Houston Opera. In an essay on the troubled NEA published in 1991, Arthur Leavitt reported that "every Pulitzer Prize-winning play since 1976 received its premiere production at a nonprofit theatre, with NEA support."³³ The peer review system seemed, for the most part, to provide assistance to valuable artists and arts organizations, and the Endowment represented such a tiny portion of the annual US budget that it seemed relatively unthreatening and unthreatened. However, starting in 1989, the situation changed drastically. With congressional attacks on the funding of traveling exhibitions by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, politicians such as Senator Jesse Helms and Representative Dana Rohrbacher led an assault on the National Endowment which would lead to the defunding of the NEA Four, and eventually the discontinuation of all arts grants to individuals.

Many critics have attempted to discern why the arts in general and performance in

³² See Milton C. Cummings, Jr. "Government and the Arts: An Overview," in Public Money and the Muse: Essays on Government Funding and the Arts, ed. Stephen Benedict, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 31-79.

³³ Arthur Leavitt, "Introduction," Public Money and the Muse: Essays on Government Funding for the Arts, ed. Stephen Benedict (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 22.

particular drew the attack of certain right-wing critics and politicians starting in the spring of that year. Leavitt sees the motivation behind the attacks as political tactic necessary to enliven the voting public: “[T]he political far right, strengthened and highly organized during the eighties, found itself without a unifying issue. Communism was on the wane worldwide, lower taxes in the face of intolerable deficits had become an impossibility, and even abortion had lost its previous political currency. The arts -- decentralized, unprepared, and politically innocent -- provided a convenient, juicy target.”³⁴ Steven Dubin proposes that performance art was attacked because it provided a forum for the expressions of the otherwise disenfranchised: “Art that reflects the relatively recent empowerment of various groups has been rejected by others as threatening, blasphemous or obscene . . . It has been easier for the relatively powerless people to establish a social beachhead in the world of making images than it is for them to penetrate the relatively unyielding realm of organizations, institutions, and political structures.”³⁵ Phelan is more direct in her opinion about what politicians and activists found threatening: “Targeting both photography and performance art, conservative politicians sought to prevent endorsing the real bodies implicated and made visible by these art forms.”³⁶ Her evocation of the real bodies involved in the artwork and the implied experiences of those bodies is of particular interest here. My chapter explores how performance art relies on notions of realness and authenticity to convey its message, and how politicians used these same elements as their weapon of choice in the assault on the NEA.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁵ Dubin, 2-3.

³⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

Documentary Drama: The Authentic Word

The third chapter, "Nothing But The Truth: Anna Deavere Smith and the Paradox of Documentary Drama," begins by explaining the various methods by which contemporary playwrights have achieved some measure of success by staging dramas composed of "found text." I focus on dramas composed of text from letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, court transcripts, and (as in the work of Anna Deavere Smith) recorded interviews, as opposed to dramas which are simply based on actual events or historical characters. Attilio Favorini characterizes this kind of dramatic work as "metonymic"; being composed of "actuals," it makes reality "the object rather than the subject of theatre."³⁷ Favorini points out that while dramatic literature has drawn inspiration from actual events practically since the dawn of Western theatre, the documentary drama has adopted a particular relation to reality in the twentieth century, concurrent with the rise of mass media images and the proliferation of journalistic standards.³⁸ The current style of metonymic drama relies on text from documents produced outside the theatre, and part of the play's strength purportedly arises from the authentic language it offers. The text, the words themselves, anchor the performance within the realm of real experience, as the words are generally understood to offer a clear and unmediated account of the subject under consideration.

While the words are generally understood as factual reproductions of actual documents, it is important to note that documentary drama only rarely presents the facts

³⁷ Attilio Favorini, Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater (Hopewell, NJ: The Echo Press, 1995), xix.

³⁸ See Attilio Favorini, "Representation and Reality: The Case of Documentary Theatre," Theatre Survey 35, no. 2 (November 1994), 31-42.

under consideration as uncomplicated. Indeed, Derek Paget has pointed out that documentary drama often seems to question the very nature of truth even as it offers factual text as evidence: “Documentary modes participate in . . . two distinct but interlinked structures of feeling: one is expressive of a faith in facts, grounded upon positivist scientific rationality; the other is expressive of a profound political skepticism which disputes the notion that facts equal truth.”³⁹ This postmodern-sounding paradox informs much contemporary documentary drama, and certainly addresses the work of Anna Deavere Smith. Indeed, the multivocal and often self-contradictory text of her work has occasioned much of the critical response to her plays and performances. Her practice of portraying widely varying individuals with diverse accounts of the same events has led to both the characterization of her work as journalistic and the subsequent erasure of her authorship of the text. In some cases, critics, unable to account for the presence of contradictory truths from a single source, have opted to view her as a shaman who channels the personalities of the individuals she performs, thus erasing the figure of Smith herself from the performance.

My discussion briefly explores the work of Erwin Piscator and Hallie Flanagan as historical antecedents for Smith’s work. Favorini emphasizes Piscator’s contributions to the production style of contemporary documentary drama. Piscator experimented with a multimedia approach to documentary drama in Germany in the 1920’s.⁴⁰ A similar multimedia approach was adopted by the Blue Blouse agitprop troops which were active

³⁹ Derek Paget, True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 17.

⁴⁰ Favorini, Voicings, xix.

in Russia from roughly the mid-1920s through the outbreak of the Second World War.⁴¹ These groups, in turn, were a big influence on Flanagan, director of the US Federal Theatre Project (FTP) from 1933 to 1939. The FTP produced several popular documentary dramas, including Triple A Plowed Under (1936), which was the first of the FTP's "Living Newspapers" to be fully realized. The "Living Newspaper" was a documentary performance designed to entertain and educate the working class audience. It is particularly compelling to note that the project was subject to government intervention over the portrayal of living government officials, and ultimately the Federal Theatre Project was disbanded when the Flanagan's actions came under scrutiny of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

The most prominent of Smith's contemporaries is documentary dramatist Emily Mann. Her plays, including Still/Life (1980), Execution of Justice (1984), Having Our Say (1994), and Greensboro: A Requiem (1996) provide important context for Smith's work.⁴² Much of Mann's work explores the complicated questions of race, nationality, and ethnic identity so important to Smith. Execution of Justice is crafted from the court transcripts and interviews which surrounded the murder of San Francisco mayor George Moscon and City Supervisor Harvey Milk and the subsequent trial of their killer. Having Our Say, which was produced on Broadway less than a year after Smith's Twilight, is based on the memoirs of Sarah and Ann Delaney, two African-American professional women who were both over one hundred years old at the time the play was written. The

⁴¹ Goldberg, Performance Art, 46.

⁴² Mann's work is collected in Testimonies: Four Plays (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997).

play tells the story of the sisters' lives, constantly evoking the social, cultural and political history which shaped their experiences. Mann's 1996 play Greensboro: A Requiem is even closer in subject and style to Smith's work in that it is a dramatic reconstruction of a racially charged historical event. In this case, Mann uses recorded interviews, court transcripts, and other documents from the public record to recreate the circumstances surrounding a violent 1979 clash between labor organizers and members of the Ku Klux Klan. Although her work is similar in style and theme to Smith's, Mann's plays have not received the intense and ultimately controversial response that Smith's have in the national media. This is doubtless in part due to the fact that Smith performs all of the roles in her premier productions herself, while Mann relies on more traditional casting of actors, in some cases (as in Greensboro) even casting an actor to portray herself (the "Interviewer") on stage. Smith's propensity to play all of the documentary subjects of the text herself is part of what makes her work controversial, as her own real body and personal history are held in tension with the experiences of those she portrays.

My chapter focuses on Smith's work and the debate which ensued when Twilight was withdrawn from Pulitzer consideration. The withdrawal was particularly vexing for those of Smith's supporters who saw her authorial strategies of re-enactment and oral history as indicative of African-American tradition. bell hooks, for example, emphasizes those aspects of Smith's performance process which speak to traditional African-American practice: "Performance as ritual re-enactment is quintessentially highlighted in Deavere Smith's work because she draws on current events and on the actual statements of a range of observers present at those events. This strategy of re-enactment has been at

the core of African-American performance practice.”⁴³ hooks’s comments point to important questions about how Smith’s work was excluded from full art status by certain vanguards of the theatrical mainstream. Ultimately, the exclusion of her work can be seen more as a function of the complicated racial issues she embodies than any genuine concern about protecting drama from an influx of other genres such as journalism or oral history. In this chapter, I explore the qualities which made it particularly difficult to characterize Smith’s dramas within existing genre categories, and come to terms with the role that both race and real material (both found text and Smith’s real, performing body) played in the controversy.

Postmodern Dance: The Authentic Body

The fourth chapter, “No Real Threat: Bill T. Jones and the Victim Art Controversy” takes up postmodern dance, and explores the ways in which the highly contentious debate over Still/Here brought the concept of victim art to the forefront of the critical imagination. By exploring Jones’s process and his avowed intentions in the creation of the piece, as well as the metaphors enacted in Croce’s article “Discussing the Undiscussable,” I attempt to determine the role which the real-life material played in the controversy. Why was it so important and upsetting to Croce that Jones had included “real” sick people in his videotapes? How was it that the choreographer’s HIV-positive status became for many the crucial repository of meaning for the performance text? How did Jones’s identity – as an African-American, HIV-positive gay man – come to be read

⁴³ bell hooks, “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition,” in Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance, ed. Catherine Ugwu (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 214.

as the keys to interpreting the piece, and the qualities which irrevocably relegate the performance to the category of victim art? How did Croce's language manipulate the dialogue surrounding the piece to create a space for her own criticism, to write herself (as a critic) back into the central position of the art-audience relationship? How does the category of "victim art" rely on notions that the real life identity of the artist is of paramount importance in the understanding of performance?

In order to address these questions, I explore the context and recent history of postmodern dance. Books like Sally Banes's Terpsichore in Sneakers (1987), Marcia Siegel's The Tail of the Dragon: New Dance, 1976-1982 (1991), and even Croce's Going to the Dance (1982) provide important clues as to the prevailing conditions of the dance world, including the conflicts which came to a head in the victim art controversy. For example, more than ten years before "Discussing the Undiscussable" was published, Croce speaks of her dismay over the inclusion of "unacceptable" issues in dance, and cites "war, disease, poverty, and death (as a fact, not as a symbol)" as "the subjects that dance cannot touch on."⁴⁴ Sondra Horton Fraleigh, another scholar of modern and postmodern dance, echoes Croce's concern about the insertion of the dancer's persona in the dance: "Good dancers become absorbed in the problems and pleasures of dancing itself. They get caught up in the larger-than-self pursuit and transcend the egotism and narcissism of which dancers are often accused. The art of dance will tolerate neither trait."⁴⁵ Fraleigh's comments speak to the critical concern that the imposition of personal information on the

⁴⁴ Arlene Croce, Going to the Dance (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 393.

⁴⁵ Sondra Horton Fraleigh, Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 23.

art of dance will strip it of the universalizing impulse which is the hallmark of formalist criticism. Her remarks are countered by Gay Morris in Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance: “Movement is simply one element of a larger whole that characterizes much postmodern performance. Within the parameters of postmodernism, dance may include images of people with real illness, it may include overt politicization and it may be utilitarian as well as aesthetic in aim.”⁴⁶ These conflicting comments prove that the controversy over Still/Here did not arise out of entirely new concerns within the realm of concert dance.

It is also important that many of the methods Jones used to create Still/Here were not in and of themselves revolutionary or even particularly innovative postmodern choices. For example, many other artists have used personal narrative and text in dance. Banes cites the early seventies work of Grand Union as one important precedent for dance which draws on lived experience: “One outgrowth of the revival of the narrative is an emphasis on the genre of autobiography, a result, perhaps, of the synthesis of new narrative concerns with the personal, intimate mode of performance that emerged in the work of Grand Union and other early post-modern choreographers, as boundaries between performer and spectator, art and life were challenged.”⁴⁷ In Choreographing Difference, Ann Cooper Albright speaks specifically to Jones’s use of autobiography, calling it “typical of the way in which many women and gay men stake out a textual ‘I’ in order to ‘talk back’ to their audience.”⁴⁸ Albright points to the work of Blondell

⁴⁶ Gay Morris, Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance (London: Routledge, 1996), 3

⁴⁷ Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers, xxx.

⁴⁸ Ann Cooper Albright, Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 120

Cummings and David Dorfman as two prime examples of contemporary dance artists who often incorporate autobiography into their performance. Jones was but one of several postmodern choreographers who used autobiographical material to challenge social expectations about gender, race, and the artist-audience relationship.

In addition, Still/Here was not the first time Jones himself had incorporated personal material into his dance. Indeed, in 1989, Arnie Zane, Jones's partner and collaborator, mentioned the inclusion of autobiographical material as an important aspect of Jones's dance aesthetic: "Meanwhile, Bill was making work that was very personal. I didn't want to share my personal life with an audience, and yet I wanted to work with this person. He was drawing my life into the performance arena . . . People were incredibly attracted by this personal story."⁴⁹ Zane's remarks indicate that on some level even he had some discomfort with Jones's longstanding practice of using personal information in his works. Clearly, Jones's strategy is both compelling and troubling. Examining the characteristics of postmodern dance and Jones's work prior to Still/Here sheds some light on the meaning and timing of the victim art controversy.

Crucial to the rhetoric of "victim art" is the assumption that the disenfranchised racial, ethnic, religious, class, sexual or gender identity of an artist infuses a work with particular meaning, and that this meaning is most often intended to castigate the audience and implicate them in the artist's unhappiness. While most readers of Croce's article take issue with her methodology and sometimes combative language, many artists and critics responded sympathetically to her frustration with mediocre reality-based art. Several

⁴⁹ Zane quoted in Elizabeth Zimmer and Susan Quasha, eds., Body Against Body: The Dance and Other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1989), 56.

expressed their own discomfort at being “blamed” and/or “lectured” by artists who take advantage of a captive audience to advance their personal agendas. These supportive respondents to Croce’s article claimed, among other things, that “victim artists” had “bamboozled critics and intimidated audiences,” and that the genre she describes enforces false standards and supports “feeble creations.”⁵⁰ While almost anyone who has attended enough self-indulgent and mediocre personal performance can understand a certain amount of frustration with low-quality art, the high level of tension and rancor which Croce’s article uncovered seems to bespeak a cultural anxiety over the implication of the audience member in the real life conditions experienced by the artist.

Another important characteristic of the victim art controversy is that it foregrounded the displacement of the cultural critic in the art-audience relationship. Croce asserts that the dance leaves her “excluded” from its circuit of meaning, “by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre.”⁵¹ One of Croce’s problems with Still/Here was that it left no place for the critic; the work, supposedly, appealed directly to the empathetic emotions of the spectator, displacing the critic and disallowing the need for professional critical interpretation. Albright describes the effect of this trend in dance: “[D]ance audiences and critics had to contend not only with verbal text in dance, but also with personal narratives that insisted, sometimes in very confrontational ways, on the political relevancy of the body’s experiences . . . For dance reviewers who were used to watching with an eye toward choreographic structure (or even non-

⁵⁰ See the many responses to Croce’s article published under the headline “Who’s the Victim?” in the “In the Mail” section of the New Yorker, 30 January 1995, 10-13.

⁵¹ Croce, “Discussing the Undiscussable,” 54.

structure), being confronted with the personal politics of a dancer's body required a radical shift in critical agendas."⁵² Part of my inquiry, then, concerns the role and value of art criticism in the postmodern age.

Also, tension between high and popular art forms infuses the debate surrounding Jones's use of real material in Still/Here. For example, Marcia Siegel's response to the victim art controversy in TDR largely condemns Croce's methods and praises Jones's work, but also takes the opportunity to criticize the popular appeal of Still/Here: "What's scary is not that art resembles life any more than it ever has, but that it resembles the mass fictions of TV and advertising. The thing I disliked about Still/Here was its mainstream aura."⁵³ Although Siegel conscientiously and adeptly critiques Croce's argument, she also has issues with the "mainstream aura" of Still/Here. Her reference to the "mass fictions of TV" recalls the use of video in the dance, and expresses concern that the high culture genre of concert dance has been disrupted by an unmediated representation of reality.⁵⁴ Her dissatisfaction with the use of video speaks to on-going cultural concerns about the ubiquitous use of video reproductions in popular entertainment and high culture's rejection of video's potential to reproduce reality. In the tangle of anxieties laid bare in the victim art controversy, it becomes clear that high culture has no use for the immediacy

⁵² Albright, 121.

⁵³ Marcia Siegel, "Virtual Criticism and the Dance of Death," TDR 40, no. 2 (Summer 1996) : 71.

⁵⁴ Siegel's comment seems especially curious considering that the video used in Still/Here (a design credited to visual artist Gretchen Bender, not to Jones) is highly artistic, mediated, and entirely subject to special effects like super slow motion and distortion. The video, in short, looks very little like the television talk shows or made-for-TV movies Siegel evokes. It seems more likely that Siegel is put off by both the popular success of the dance and the representations of it which proliferated in the mass media.

of real life material and cannot accommodate any art which sanctions mass appeal.

Reality and This Postmodern Moment

In most realms of cultural production, the lines between real and unreal are growing increasingly blurry. Advances in technology have brought into question sacrosanct epistemological notions of the nature of reality. Virtual reality technology, which has only begun to be realized, continues to hold out the promise of an experiential world which is not real, of experiences which do not, actually, happen. Television, beyond question the primary source for the dissemination of information and images, has become increasingly preoccupied with talk shows, news programs, and an increasing number of documentary entertainments. Television seems especially adept at re-packaging reality for the entertainment of their audience. Contemporary programming seems overwhelmed with reality-based programs, as the lines between journalism and entertainment are continually traversed. "Infotainment" has become the order of the day, and shows like "Rescue: 911," "Dateline NBC," and MTV's "The Real World" continue to proliferate. Any and all forms which profess to offer the viewer glimpses of reality, albeit electronically mediated and manipulated, dominate the broadcast day. The massive success in the recent months of "reality TV," especially CBS's blockbuster series Survivor!, bespeaks a widespread cultural fascination with forms which pretend to transparently display base human emotions and real life events without artistic mediation on the part of the producers.

Television's current preoccupation with reality-based programming (which begs the question of what kind of programming would not be considered reality-based) speaks

to the postmodern concept of hyperreality. The hyperreal condition, in which no meaningful distinction between the real and the fake can be made, is an ideal operational metaphor for television, as noted by performance critic C. Carr: "Television has made it unclear what real is. The tube's power is to absorb and flatten anything it transmits, giving equal weight to Ollie North, Bruce Willis, and the latest spokesmodel. It's impossible to know what, if anything, to believe."⁵⁵ I would suggest that the "flattening" effect of television goes even further, making it relatively impossible to differentiate between the reality of Monica Lewinsky and that of Murphy Brown. It is important to remember, however, that television has not created this postmodern condition, but simply plays out the tension (or lack thereof) between reality and simulation to full effect. In Tabloid Culture, Kevin Glynn figures the current obsession with the artistic reproduction of gritty, material reality as the product, not the progenitor, of postmodern flux: "When the difference between 'reality' and its 'representations' becomes obscure and uncertain, there ensues a frantic overproduction of signs of reality via the technologies of reproduction."⁵⁶ Chapter 5 of this study, "Conclusion: Performance and Reality in the Contemporary Context," addresses how theatre relates to the broader context of cultural productions which have incorporated real materials. As this chapter comes to some concluding thoughts about the use of real material in the performances previously examined, it is important to hold these subjects in tension with the proliferation of reality-based entertainment in the culture at large and their subsequent representations in the

⁵⁵ C. Carr, On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 229.

⁵⁶ Kevin Glynn, Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power and the Transformation of American Television (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 41.

popular press.

The press tends to simultaneously exploit the popularity of reality-based programming for its profit potential and bemoan its existence. News magazines put glossy photos of reality TV's celebrities du jour on their cover while publishing opinion essays condemning the programs themselves and the cultural decline they indicate. Many of the contemporary written responses to these shows reflect this deep ambivalence. Salacious-sounding headlines and "caught-in-the-act" photo spreads encourage the reading audience to consume the programs and revel in their constructed reality, while the articles themselves often take pointed jabs at the society this reality supposedly represents. For example, one recent article in Maclean's was published under the title "Peeping Tom Television," and included a blow by blow recap of events of the FOX Who Wants To Marry a (Multi)Millionaire? (2000) debacle. It then offers the following analysis of the shows' effects: "In the process, the family TV is metamorphosing from a comforting electronic hearth into an aggressive probe prying into the closets of ordinary folk."⁵⁷ The author's alarmist rhetoric suggests that these television programs could eventually take over society and control reality itself. Many of these sources, while reaping the benefits of the shows' popularity, use their existence and popular appeal as indicators of the depths to which human cultural production has sunk.

Much postmodern theory also manifests a great deal of interest in the collapse of the binary opposition between reality and fantasy, between the object and its image. A brief survey of a few recent titles indicates this preoccupation. For example, you would expect an anthology entitled Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World (1989)

⁵⁷ Robert Sheppard, "Peeping Tom Television," Maclean's, 10 April 2000, 58.

to present a certain skepticism about the existence of a knowable objective reality; indeed, Hilary Lawson begins her introduction to the volume with the blunt statement, “If we are certain of anything, it is that we are certain of nothing.” She goes on: “Ours is a world awash with relativism. It has seeped into our culture, it threatens our faith.”⁵⁸ Her comment suggests a deep cynicism about the potential for progress in a world where all objective standards have been exposed as temporal, situational, and contextual. Many contemporary theorists, such as Michael Luntley (Reason, Truth and Self: The Postmodern Reconditioned) and Christopher Norris (The Truth About Postmodernism) reject the supposedly dangerous relativism of postmodernism and seek to reclaim the much more stable theoretical paradigm of rational knowledge.⁵⁹ Postmodern questions about not just the nature but the existence of “reality” per se lead many critics to dismiss postmodernism as a self-indulgent attempt to excuse all manner of cultural decline.

The title of Walter Truett Anderson’s book Reality Isn’t What it Used to Be (1990) indicates a similar interest in the postmodern destabilization of Enlightenment ideas that truth and untruth are mutually exclusive and reality is knowable through rational investigation.⁶⁰ Anderson, however, is uninterested in proposing that the

⁵⁸ Hilary Lawson, “Introduction: Stories About Stories,” In Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World, ed. Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), xi.

⁵⁹ Michael Luntley, Reason, Truth and Self: The Postmodern Reconditioned (London: Routledge, 1995) and Christopher Norris, The Truth About Postmodernism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁶⁰ Walter Truett Anderson, Reality Isn’t What it Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). For a useful anthology of short essays on this topic, see Anderson’s compilation The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World (New York: Putnam, 1995).

contemporary fascination with reality or the postmodern idea that truth and reality may in fact be illusory are indications that human civilization itself is beyond hope. Anderson offers insight into the contemporary condition whereby reality is increasingly viewed as a subjective, relative construct, and explains some of the cultural anxiety this produces among certain parts of the population. In a typical postmodern nod to popular culture, Anderson compares our postmodern condition to the penultimate scene of The Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy discovers that the Wizard is just an ordinary human being: “So goes the human quest for the reality beyond human artifice. We like to believe that our constructions of reality come from beyond us . . . But for centuries, the human species has been discovering that it is the creator of its own reality – making the discovery, and retreating from it in disappointment (because the wizard is not what we expected) and in fear (because the freedom the discovery brings us is unknown and terrifying.)”⁶¹ Many contemporary critics and theorists manifest this simultaneous fascination, disappointment, and fear about the collapse of the real. The cultural products (especially theatre) this dissertation addresses also reflect these mixed emotional responses.

Much of the most useful theory for my investigation reflects a decidedly postmodern point of view. In Simulacra and Simulations, Baudrillard says: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. [Causing a] panic-stricken

⁶¹ Anderson, Reality Isn't What it Used to Be, 29.

production of the real and the referential.”⁶² Baudrillard suggests that the contemporary preoccupation with questions of “the real” and the careful monitoring of its borders reflects a contemporary understanding that in the postmodern moment, reality is no more substantive than its image. The postmodern artists who serve as the main focal points of this study are consciously involved in an attempt to recreate reality in their own image. Paradoxically, the impulse behind their work often seeks real world social change. By interrogating the strategies artists use to attach their artworks to the realm of real experience, I attempt to determine what potential – political, social, and/or artistic – real material in performance actually holds. This requires an examination of how real material is used, and how critics and audiences assign meaning to these “realities.” Hopefully, this study can illuminate the ideological forces in play to police the boundaries of reality for all of us.

⁶² Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulations, trans. Shelia Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6-7.

CHAPTER TWO

GET REAL:

STORIES, BODIES, AND THE NEA

Why should the idea of a woman rubbing chocolate on her body so inflame the American public?

– John Frohnmayer, Leaving Town Alive

Reality is always more shocking than art.

– Karen Finley, “The Shock of the Real”

In the summer of 1990, Karen Finley was interviewed for People magazine and described her performances as “the opposite of what some see as entertainment. Instead of escaping, people are confronted with their problems. I wish I lived in a world where I could paint bouquets of petunias and rainbows, but that’s not our experience in 1990.”¹ Her remarks are telling for two reasons. First, they point to the Finley’s heartfelt belief that real life experience dictates the parameters of performance itself. Second, they appear in People, the glossy pulp magazine which chronicles the lives, loves, and scandals of the nation’s celebrities-du-jour. How did Finley, a performance artist, end up in this Bible of popular culture? Why were the editors convinced that average Americans would want to read about Finley while they waited in line at the grocery store? What was performance art, which had thrived on its small, devoted audience at local venues, doing

¹ Kim Hubbard, “Bending to the Political Winds, the NEA Cuts Off Grants,” People Weekly, 6 August 1990, 94.

in the middle of a national controversy? And how, ultimately, does the reliance on lived experience complicate the production and reception of performance art?

These are the questions this chapter will address. While the on-going, complicated, ten-year struggle between the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEA Four (as well as other artists), the media, the Congress, and the American public can not possibly be addressed in its entirety here, I will examine the initial well-publicized debates about performance art and arts funding as they erupted in the summer of 1990. At that time, the National Endowment for the Arts, with its brand new chief John Frohnmayer, was under attack for having funded exhibits of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.² In May of that year, as the National Council on the Arts was preparing to distribute its grants, Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Richard Novak published a stinging critique of the agency, focusing on performance artist Karen Finley as an example of government-funded obscenity. Finley's grant application had been previously approved by a peer review panel, as had the applications from performance artists John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, but Frohnmayer eventually decided to reject all four artists. His decision resulted in a tremendous controversy that played itself out in the national media, the academic and critical press, the houses of Congress, and ultimately the Supreme Court. Performance art was

² The Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano controversies, while too complex to pursue here, are an extremely important backdrop for this discussion. See Wendy Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and James Gardner, Culture or Trash? (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1993) for two widely diverse but informative readings of the Mapplethorpe/Serrano case. Also, Michael Bolton has collected many of the source documents from the controversy in Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts (New York: New Press, 1992).

suddenly exposed to the wide open arena of the popular press and public debate. The reality-based work that had found an appreciative audience in the small, relatively private performance spaces and clubs of the East Village was subjected to full public scrutiny in a series of moves that did artistic, financial, and personal damage to the particular artists involved and the arts community in general. In the end, the National Endowment eliminated all grants for individuals; individual performers are no longer recognized or funded by the NEA.³

As is so often the case with national media events, the controversy fed off itself. The initial publicity led to additional articles, letters, phone calls, and demonstrations by parties from both sides of the debate. This in turn encouraged Congress, the White House, and the artists involved to take ever more extreme positions. The political cache of the controversy motivated pundits from all sides of the argument to weigh in repeatedly. Right-wing activists like Jesse Helms, Donald Wildmon (head of the American Family Association), and Pat Robertson used the threat of reality-based performance to organize media and direct mail fund-raising campaigns for their political causes. Liberal magazines like The Progressive and The Advocate (the most prominent national gay weekly) also disseminated information about each development in the story.

³ For a narrative description of the history of the National Endowment for the Arts, see Livingston Biddle, Our Government and the Arts: A Perspective from the Inside (New York: ACA Books, 1988). For a very particular "insider's" perspective, see John Frohnmayer, Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Arts Warrior (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993). For an opposing view, see Alice Goldfarb Marquis, Art Lessons: Learning from the Rise and Fall of Public Arts Funding (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Also, Jane Alexander, Command Performance: An Actress in the Theater of Politics (New York: Public Affairs, 2000) provides an excellent account of general conditions and subsequent events at the NEA.

The result was a massively disproportionate level of media attention focused on an arts Endowment which cost each American taxpayer less than one dollar a year.⁴ As Wendy Steiner points out: “It did no good for Representative Yates to point out the tiny percentage of controversial grants funded by the NEA, or for Newsweek to discover that the entire NEA budget was smaller than the amount the Pentagon spent each year on its military bands. Clearly, something was at stake that was not susceptible to rationality or a sense of proportion.”⁵ This fact was not lost on many of the writers who were covering the story, like Michael Kinsley of The New Republic: “This question of arts subsidies plays an absurdly overblown role in the public debate . . . it’s junk-food populism: a high calorie, low-nutrition substitute for serious politics.”⁶ Still, this did not deter writers and political activists from generating a steady stream of articles and news stories about the controversy.

Many of these authors have attempted to explain why the issue hit such a sensitive public nerve. Kinsley and many other critics suggest that the NEA controversy provided the Right with a convenient target to absorb some of the cultural fear and anxiety left over from the Cold War.⁷ Steiner locates the tension over art which disrupts the art/life binary in a patent refusal by politicians on both sides to acknowledge the pleasure in the artist’s

⁴ See Robert Hughes, “Whose Art Is It Anyway?” in Time, 4 June 1990, 47. Hughes claims that in 1989 the arts endowment cost each taxpayer about 69¢ per year.

⁵ Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure, 29.

⁶ Michael Kinsley, “Arts and Crafts,” The New Republic, 16 March 1992, 6.

⁷ See also Arthur Leavitt, “Introduction,” in Public Money and the Muse: Essays on Government Funding for the Arts, ed. Stephen Benedict (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 19-30.

willful confusion of reality and fiction: “The fear of words and fantasies is rampant in leftist and rightist circles alike – a fear of the ungovernability of ambiguity, of the fearsome paths one might travel because of the free-floating signifier or the unanchored dream . . . Thus, artists nowadays work in a climate of literalist hysteria on the part of political conservatives and reformers alike.”⁸ Steiner’s argument is compelling because it speaks to one underlying theme of the performance art crisis: the rejection of the pleasurable potential resulting from the fusion of art and life. In Steiner’s analysis, pleasure troubles the Right because to them it signifies the undisciplined, uncontained human body, which belongs in private, not public. The Left, while often supporting the artists involved, rejects the pleasurable potential in the willful confusion of art and life out of an inflated sense of social activism and the conviction that art must be involved in serious social change. When the real material used by the NEA Four does not conveniently adhere to these pre-conceived cultural expectations, both sides exhibit a critical inability to adequately assess its meaning.⁹ Steiner thus provides an astute reading of one important facet of the controversy over performance art.

However, I would argue that the overblown publicity indicates a cultural anxiety far more insidious than any straightforward concerns about a relatively unknown art genre. The intense political and public response laid bare deep-seated social fears over the disruption of the traditional social order by alternative identity politics. By the early 1990’s, performance art was attracting large numbers of artists who felt excluded from

⁸ Steiner, 75.

⁹ See Peggy Phelan, “Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA and You,” *TDR* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1990) : 4-15 for one of the few acknowledgments of this failure by the Left and a productive attempt to provide a counter-reading of Serrano’s work Piss Christ.

universal narratives of the ideal body by virtue of their sex, gender, sexual preference, race, or ability. This marginal status meant that the practitioners were particularly vulnerable to the attacks of mainstream cultural critics. Although the controversy often obfuscated the ideological impulse behind the defunding, it is ultimately clear that the attackers were motivated by a desire to silence art which questions accepted social norms. Some astute writers pointed this out at the time: “What is to go, opponents of the N.E.A. generally agree, is, above all, artists and institutions on the social-fringe – gay and lesbian performance artists, feminist video makers, Latino photographers and theatre groups, black poets and painters.”¹⁰ The art of the NEA Four provides documentary evidence, often in the living body of the performer, to implicate the powerful in the exploitation of the powerless. In a society which has largely accepted that the personal is political, fiction could never have been as threatening to the status quo. Ultimately, the real material used by the NEA Four threatened to complicate accepted paradigms of identity and reality in America’s comfortable, post-Cold War, late-capitalist society.

What kind of real material was this? Like most performance artists, the NEA Four use a combination of performance strategies, but their use of real material can be broadly categorized in two ways. First, performance art manifests a prevailing interest in staging the life experiences of the author-performer, and the performances therefore tend to be full of stories, characters, and events from the author’s life. This kind of autobiographical impulse is obviously not new for literature or for theatre. Holly Hughes specifically aligns her performance strategy with an on-going autobiographical tradition:

¹⁰ Paul Mattick, Jr., “Arts and the State,” The Nation, 1 October 1990, 348.

“It’s very much related to an American political tradition in which the first-person narrative is so important.”¹¹ The notion that autobiographical narrative can construct our national story has been a cherished American belief since figures such as Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin published their own highly successfully and ultimately canonized personal accounts. Over two hundred years later, as the personal narrative was increasingly being adopted by performances artists of all races, genders, sexualities, and abilities, the formal structures of autobiography came into harsh conflict with both the radical content and live bodies of the politically motivated performance artists in question.

These live bodies actually represent the second, perhaps more important, habitual manifestation of reality in performance art. Contemporary performance artists tend to use their own bodies as their primary medium of expression. Indeed, the addition of the living body to the previously static work of visual art is one important marker of the historical genesis of performance art. Michael Peterson describes this phenomenon: “In most performance art, it is the performing body of the author-figure that assumes the status of art object.”¹² Peterson figures the body of the performer as art in and of itself. This status as “art object” was particularly important in the controversy over the NEA Four because of their willful display and deliberate celebration of uncontrolled, uncontained bodies. They variously perform nude; enter the audience; use food in anti-

¹¹ Holly Hughes, quoted in David Savran, ed., The Playwright’s Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), 76-77.

¹² Michael Peterson, Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 12.

social ways; celebrate (gay) sex, sexuality and desire; perform all manner of biological functions; evoke the cultural specter of AIDS; and generally sing, dance and work themselves into a frenzy. Finley's body in particular became a locus for the cultural tension between art and life, as she simultaneously embodied artistic creation and personal experience. Rebecca Schneider comments: "Karen Finley makes her body explicit as a stage across which she enacts and critiques the cultural dramas of disembodied bodies."¹³ The insistence on the real body of the artist, as opposed to the idealized body of transcendent universal art, is an important part of the performance art aesthetic, and an important indicator of why the work generated so much social tension. Some of this tension comes from a continuing fear of the body, especially the uncontrolled body, and the pleasure it potentially evokes.

The artists' tendency to celebrate the body of the performer played right into this cultural fear. Schneider's book The Explicit Body in Performance explores the consequences of this trend. She asserts that performance has the potential to deconstruct oppressive cultural mechanisms: "In feminist performance art of the explicit body, the cultural ruses of disembodiment are made apparent by foregrounding the literal embodiment of the tactile body."¹⁴ Schneider suggests that much of this work draws fire because it threatens the imaginary cultural divide between one explicit body and another. Timothy Murray ascribes the conservative response to the NEA Four to the potential of their performances to simultaneously accentuate and dissolve traditional notions of sexual

¹³ Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (London: Routledge, 1997), 100.

¹⁴ Schneider, 100.

difference: “They performed and demystified patriarchy’s fear of its own shaky determination by difference and its vicissitudes of sexuality, race, identity, love, and death. Such fear, its negation, and its rage against the expression of its own inscription in the tear of difference has fueled the antitheatrical drive since its inception in Plato.”¹⁵

The artists’ refusal to maintain the socially-sanctioned boundaries between self and other, self and art, and art and life activated cultural phobias over the stability of the subject as the source of perception. This in turn gave conservative cultural critics fuel for their attack. The art became the excuse for the persecution of marginalized individuals.

Performance art is particularly vulnerable to this attack because it has, as Peterson points out, tended to privilege “reality” over “fictionality” in terms of performance space, performed text, and authorial presence.¹⁶ The controversy over its standards and proper use therefore provides a particular opportunity to explore the ontological oppositions (or, permeable boundaries?) between categories such as public and private, personal and political, life and art. The Right’s enraged response speaks to society’s deep ambivalence over performance and its potential to effect change in the real world, as Richard Bauman notes: “Perhaps the key here is the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared – admired for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting the status quo.”¹⁷ This ambivalent relationship becomes apparent in the

¹⁵ Timothy Murray, Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video and Art (London: Routledge, 1997), 7-8.

¹⁶ Peterson, 12.

¹⁷ Richard Bauman, Verbal Art As Performance (Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1977), 45.

extensive and convoluted media response to the Evans and Novak article and the defunding of the NEA Four.

Why did the NEA Four come from the performance world, not the world of fiction-writing or dance? Perhaps because performance art relies on real material to simultaneously document and interrogate such categories as identity, experience, and reality itself. It is no accident that photography and performance art were the first two genres which came under right wing attack. As Peggy Phelan points out, both inherently rely on an emphatic connection to the real: “Both performance and photography labor under the burden of ‘the real,’ both complicate the distinction between representation and presence, and both rummage in the late ruins of visibility.”¹⁸ Phelan astutely notes that these art forms are distinguished by their use of real material, which complicates both presence and representation. sacrosanct notions in late capitalist society. Steiner also finds an important parallel in the reception of these two forms of reality-based art. In her analysis of the Mapplethorpe obscenity trial, she suggests that the artists’ appeal to “the real” enabled their detractors to disregard both artistic form and intention:

Like Jesse Helms sending the Mapplethorpe photographs around Congress in sealed envelopes as proof positive of their obscenity, or [Senator Alfonse] D’Amato reacting to the words “Piss Christ” as an unambiguous religious slur, or the columnists Evans and Novak proclaiming that the smearing of a nude body with chocolate was obscene without considering Karen Finley’s meaning, the prosecution in the Mapplethorpe trial assumed that the photographs would

¹⁸ Peggy Phelan, “Money Talks, Again,” *TDR* 35, no. 3 (Fall 1991) : 132.

indict themselves, that they did not require interpretation, and that their obscenity was a self-evident fact.¹⁹

Steiner asserts that the conservatives who sustained the growing NEA controversy had no use for the expert discourse of art criticism. Their self-appointed role as art interpreters authorized them to decontextualize various texts and images from the performances and proliferate their mis-readings in the mass media. They read the sexual content of the art, content which is made most explicit in the performing body on stage, as unambiguous evidence of obscenity. Exploiting the notion that the use of real material in art facilitates an unhindered and transparent transfer of meaning, these critics took it upon themselves to tell the public what they assumed was obvious: human expression which celebrates the (real, not idealized) sexualized human body is not art but pornography. These assumptions about the art made by the NEA Four lead to questions about performance art per se and the role that certain features of the genre played in the socio-political struggle which occurred.

Performance and Reality

To understand the context of the NEA debacle it is useful to try to establish some genre criteria for performance art, however difficult that may prove. Defining performance art is no small task, considering the diverse nature of the works commonly grouped together in this category. Everything from visually-oriented gallery works which incorporate the live body to personal monologues to multi-media extravaganzas have been included: Critics have repeatedly articulated the difficulty of pinning down the

¹⁹ Steiner, 33.

characteristics of the form. Marvin Carlson suggests that as artists and critics attempted to delineate the parameters of the field, individual artists “were always slipping” between the lines.²⁰ Many critics prefer instead to highlight the hybrid quality of performance, as Kay Larson does: “Performance art is the least understood of the genres. It may look like theatre, but its practitioners are usually artists who slip back and forth between visual forms and live action.”²¹ Her comments typify remarks on performance art in the popular press, remarks which include Mel Gussow’s assessment: “The fact is that performance art is one of the most inclusive – and misunderstood – of theatrical arts.”²² Not exactly visual art, not exactly dance, not exactly theatre, the determining characteristics of performance art are difficult to pin down. Significantly, one important common feature of this hybrid form is its tendency to question and in many cases deconstruct the art-life binary.

If performance art is a hybrid, its genetic forbears come from the visual arts of painting and sculpture as much as the performing arts of dance and theatre. Indeed, performance art as it is commonly understood today grew out of the gallery scene that dominated visual art in the late sixties and early seventies. Lenore Champagne describes the genesis of performance art in both visual and revolutionary terms: “Performance art’s roots are not in theatre, but in the art world and in dissent.”²³ Carlson has also noted the

²⁰ Marvin Carlson, Performance: A Critical Introduction (London: Routledge, 1996), 104.

²¹ Kay Larson, “Censor Deprivation,” New York Magazine, 6 August 1990, 48.

²² Mel Gussow, “Artist as Art,” New York Times, 1 August 1990, C11.

²³ Lenore Champagne, ed., Out From Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), xi.

strong connection between performance art and visual art: “The major foundations for the performance work in New York and California in the 1970’s . . . came primarily not out of experimental theatre work, but out of new approaches to the visual arts, such as environments, happenings, live and conceptual art.”²⁴ RoseLee Goldberg points to the strong reciprocal relationship between various modern art movements and performance art: “Whenever a certain school, be it Cubism, Minimalism, or conceptual art, seemed to have reached an impasse, artists have turned to performance as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions.”²⁵ Goldberg has also described the specific emergence of American performance art in the 1960’s as a logical development of painting: “Live art was the next logical step from environments and assemblages. And most of these events would directly reflect contemporary painting.”²⁶ Visual art forms were a vital influence and progenitor of the early performance art movement.

Another important characteristic of performance art, particularly as background to the controversy over government funding, is the anti-establishment aesthetic Champagne mentions above. She goes on to describe performance art as a form with “subversive origins and tendencies.”²⁷ In his own attempts to characterize performance art, John Frohnmayer repeatedly uses adjectives such as “controversial” and “volatile.”²⁸ Angelika

²⁴ Carlson, 101.

²⁵ RoseLee Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 7.

²⁶ Ibid, 128.

²⁷ Champagne, xi.

²⁸ Frohnmayer, 152, 153.

Festa claims that the “challenge” of performance art is “to represent a voice with an agenda, to confront expressively and critically not only the audience, as its roots in the strategies of the avant-garde would imply, but also a range of issues.”²⁹ This “issue-oriented” art would lead to an increasing emphasis on the inclusion of real life material as performers attempted to make art which challenged prevailing social conditions. Even in its earliest manifestations, performance art exhibited a tendency to protest the status quo which would ultimately come to fruition in the NEA controversy.

As the sixties and seventies turned into eighties and nineties, performance art began to manifest some important categorical changes. These changes saw a move away from the minimalist approach favored by many visual artists, and a reliance instead on the lived experience of the performance artists as expressed in their own words. Jacki Apple describes the change as a shift from a focus on the visual to a focus on the body of the performer: “In the ‘70’s performance art was primarily a time-based visual art form in which text was at the service of image; by the early ‘80’s performance art had shifted to movement-based work, with the performance artist as choreographer.”³⁰ This emphasis on movement and dance was contingent on the notion that the body of the artist was the primary medium of expression. The painting and/or decoration of the space and use of props and objects were increasingly of secondary importance, while the body of the performer was becoming the key. The insistent celebration of the performer’s body would become an important key to subsequent anxieties about reality on stage.

²⁹ Angelka Festa, “Introduction: Shall We Talk?” in Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties, ed. Linda Montano (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3.

³⁰ Jacki Apple, “Art at the Barricades,” Artweek, 3 May 1990, 21-2.

The emphasis on the body of the artist fostered the idea that the artist's life experiences were the most appropriate subject for the work. This led to the increased use of autobiographical text in performance art, particularly as the 1980's progressed. The notion that the performance artist should present some aspect of "self," rather than a fictional "character," was one important distinction between performance art as a genre and traditional mainstream theatre activities:

The distinction between performance and theatre is delicate but crucial. Artists of the sixties rejected the traditional theatrical process of projecting themselves into a role written by someone else. They resisted having to erase their personalities in order to assume another. Instead, they rummaged around in their own histories and personae to invent roles that offered self-revelation.³¹

Both Holly Hughes and Tim Miller use overtly autobiographical stories in their work. They exemplify the direction of much contemporary performance art, which assumes that exposing the real life experience of the author is the appropriate goal of performance. These performers did not abandon the body as an important locus of meaning, but added language to facilitate personal exposure. Carlson describes this developing (and on-going) trend in performance art: "Despite its privileging of language uncharacteristic of early performance art, this sort of work still focuses on the specific personae of the performer, displaying now both body and psyche."³² Of course, not all performance artists use autobiographical text. Artists like Eric Bogosian and Eleanor Antin create

³¹ Larson, 48-49.

³² Carlson, 115.

performances by presenting elaborately developed fictional characters.³³ Indeed, Finley and Fleck, two of the NEA Four, do not create performances that are solely comprised of their life stories. However, the growing autobiographical impulse of performance art encouraged the inclusion of identity-based and political content, which both reassert the work's connection to real life events and ultimately proved threatening to the status quo.

In addition, the move away from the art gallery and towards the autobiographical stage has led to a paring down of elaborate environmental designs or stage sets. In this way, performance art rejected many of the traditional elements of theatre, especially mainstream twentieth-century American theatre, such as dramatic text, fictional character, elaborate scenery, proscenium staging, and fourth-wall arrangements. A New York Times description of the performance art scene which appeared a few months before the controversy began suggests the success of this pared down aesthetic, claiming that this work illustrates "that most uncommercial virtue of all: the demand that the audience meet them halfway using their own imaginations . . . [the artists] create entire universes, frequently cast with figures from their own past."³⁴ Comments like this indicate the difficulty of reconciling performance art with mainstream theatre's reliance upon elaborate, illusionistic sets and props, and suggest that the heightened ephemeral quality of performance art does not mesh well with capitalist notions that popular art must turn a profit. Performance art seems to prefer exposing reality with all of its unpleasant and

³³ A selection of Eleanor Antin's work is collected in Eleanora Antinova Plays (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994). On Eric Bogosian, see Michael Peterson, Straight White Male.

³⁴ Irene Lacher, "In Monology, to Play It Right Do It Yourself," New York Times, 1 October 1989, H5.

unfashionable flaws to the marketable process of selling an illusion. This made it extremely attractive for artists with active political lives, especially those feminist performers who sought to examine and undermine the various social and political oppressions faced by women and other minorities.

The (Feminist) Politics of Performance Art

Performance art's growing emphasis on the body and experience of the artist held particular promise for feminists. In the late sixties and seventies, many feminist organizations made a concerted effort to deconstruct the boundaries between public and private, and their strategies meshed easily with this parallel trend in performance art: "The women's movement, with its consciousness-raising groups, encouraged the exposure of personal material in public. Personal history was turned into art by decisions about structure and form; new structures and forms arose with the expression of this personal material."³⁵ The feminist insistence that "the personal is political" meant that the ever-expanding repertoire of feminist performance art drew largely from the personal, lived experiences of the performers. This provided a vital outlet for personal, political, and artistic impulses that had previously been stifled: "Feminists have had compelling reasons to experiment with performance art, which gave them the means to explore themselves, their sexual and social identities, and their politics – in their own voices."³⁶ Repeatedly, performers and critics assert that performance art – interdisciplinary,

³⁵ Champagne, xi.

³⁶ Larson, 49.

unfettered, and rooted in the body and soul of the artist – was and is a compelling form for those who have otherwise been excluded or oppressed by traditional artistic representation.

This encouraged some women to develop purposefully confrontational performances, often willfully flying in the face of both traditional performance standards and the mores of social decorum. Many female performance artists have contributed to this anti-social aesthetic, which C. Carr calls, “a sort of rude girl network that provides context for outrageous work.”³⁷ Working in this atmosphere leads to experimentation with language, subject matter, and forms that could never be accepted in more traditional venues, or with a less sympathetic audience. Feminist artists used this freedom to protest the role of women in society: “Among the most groundbreaking were transgressive women performers who worked straight from the id to address issues of power and control, who made themselves monstrous on stage, acting out every definition of ‘filthy’ and ‘mad.’”³⁸ Performers such as Lydia Lunch, and Dancenoise are often cited as examples of this kind of transgressive performance, using grating vocal registers, horrifying content, scatological language and unorthodox props to confront the audience with the degradation of women in contemporary society. Karen Finley and other artists adopted many of these strategies as a form of rebellion against prevailing conditions for women in performance and in society.

³⁷ C. Carr, “Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts,” in Acting Out: Feminist Performances, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 142.

³⁸ Champagne, xviii.

This desire to defy social and artistic norms often causes the women involved in performance art to be characterized not as rebellious, but as angry. The stereotype of the “angry feminist” has proliferated in the popular imagination and influenced the creation and reception of performance art as well. Some feminists embrace the idea that anger can be productively channeled to effect social change. For example, Andrea Juno and V. Vale chose the title Angry Women (1991) for their anthology about feminist performance art. Their introduction suggests that rage is the appropriate emotion for feminist performance, and offers an extended meditation on the cultural reception of angry women, marking several gendered differences in the way anger is perceived: “When rebelliously critiquing society, women have never been characterized as sexy or desirable (like a female James Dean) but rather as a prime bitch: grim, humorless, and non-sexual.” Juno and Vale go on to assert that certain artists can radically deconstruct these traditional assumptions: “Women have a different, less destructive relationship to anger than men Theirs is not the frozen rage of serial killers, which festers internally, but rage that can be channeled creatively – as dramatized by performance artists such as Karen Finley.”³⁹ Both Finley and Hughes are interviewed in this volume. Their art, with its explicitly feminist content, does often sound angry, but it is also humorous, sexual, untraditional, and firmly connected to the real world. As such, it complicates the stereotype that suggests the “angry feminist” is a one-note, humorless, hyper-critical social activist. Instead, their work reasserts the multi-faceted material relationship between the performing subject and the social world.

³⁹ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, eds., Angry Women (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1991), 5.

As performers grew increasingly political and confrontational, the favored location for performance art was no longer art galleries, but small performance spaces and nightclubs, like the WOW Café and 8BC. Carr describes these very small, often identity-based clubs and spaces as venues which supported spontaneity and radical experimentation: “It was all very fluid and playful and little seemed at stake . . . Playing to crowds of friends, other artists, and drunks, performers experimented, even dared to fail, and worked for the joy of it.”⁴⁰ Women artists found a certain kind of freedom in the “safe space” that the club scene represented. The clubs fostered an assumption that artist and audience were part of a common experience, and shared a personal investment in the work being presented. Larson describes the resulting connection between performers and audience: “The audience for performance doesn’t expect the sanitized and distanced narrative flow of modern theatre. It prefers to be drawn into the real life of the performer, through layers of self and soul, to get the texture and tenor of the artist’s thinking and – if lucky – a group catharsis.”⁴¹ As performance art became less minimal, less conceptual, and more rooted in the politicized experiences of the performer, there was a growing assumption that the artist and the audience were in it together.

Increasingly, artists used their performances to stage the resistance of all those who felt disenfranchised. This had important consequences for performers and the audiences they addressed: “[P]erformance art soon became a home for disenfranchised artists of all stripes who needed a place to speak their minds and for audiences who

⁴⁰ C. Carr, On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), xvii.

⁴¹ Larson, 49.

needed to hear what was being said.”⁴² The growing preoccupation with personal identity encouraged all manner of reality-based art. Linda Frye Burnham, co-founder (with Tim Miller) of the Highways Performance Space in L.A., describes this evolution: “More than half of what we see at Highways is about individual identity. It’s about people from so many different cultures being pushed together in L.A. and introducing themselves to each other.”⁴³ Drawing on the feminist performance strategies which had successfully foregrounded women’s real-life experiences, artists from a vast array of identity categories began to emphasize their bodies and their lives. Ultimately, this interest in not just exploring but documenting these experiences and providing evidence of the lived inequality of the disenfranchised social subject would lead to the climate that fostered the NEA controversy. Performance art had become the genre of choice for those individuals who refused to silently submit to the inherent injustices of contemporary society.

Guillermo Gomez-Pena, an influential performance artist in his own right, speaks of the performance artist’s desire to claim the subject position of discourse, and hopefully the power that goes along with it: “I aspire to speak from the center, to be active in the making of culture. The same is true for gays, women, and artists of color, who can’t afford to be marginalized anymore. Performance art is the one place where this can happen.”⁴⁴ Gomez-Pena sees this progressive social potential as an important part of the

⁴² Steven Durland, “When the Personal Gets Political,” *Utne Reader*, Jan/Feb 1992, 16.

⁴³ Quoted in Margot Mifflin, “Performance Art: What is it and Where is it Going,” *ARTNews*, April 1992, 87.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Mifflin, 89.

performance art aesthetic. Many other performance artists adopted similar strategies. James Luna, for example, created an art piece which “exhibited himself as a prototypical American Indian. In one display case, his body was laid out and labeled with tags identifying scars inflicted in drunken fights.”⁴⁵ Luna’s strategy assumes that the artistic display of his body and the documentary evidence of his lived experience are the most effective way to question assumptions about race, physicality, and biography. The real material used by many performance artists effectively troubles the subject-object binary, as the performer claims both positions simultaneously. Performance art has become the most accommodating form to document and question the experiences of all those excluded from normative mainstream discourse. The NEA Four, then, were by no means exceptional in their emphasis on real bodies and lived experience. To begin to understand why these four artists were singled out for censure, it is useful to briefly examine those aspects of their work which most clearly complicate the boundaries between reality and art.

The Fab, Fluid Four

Why were these four artists the ones at the center of the crisis? What brought these particular individuals to the attention of NEA chair John Frohnmayer, and subsequently to the forefront of the controversy? Performance art typically experiments with and celebrates the personal identity of the artist, as we have seen. It is therefore unlikely that these particular individuals were drawn into the national spotlight because

⁴⁵ Ibid.

their work documented non-traditional bodies and experiences by drawing reality into art. In some sense, their defunding seems rather arbitrary; these artists were probably no more or less “threatening” than many others who were not questioned. It is therefore useful to provide a brief overview of each artist and the kind of art they were involved in at the time of their defunding. By highlighting those aspects of their work which most consciously confound reality and performance, I hope to draw out the connections between these four artists, connections which I believe indicate the extent to which each artist’s use of real material frustrated traditional critical strategies which would contain and dismiss them.

Of the NEA Four, Tim Miller and Holly Hughes most clearly fit in a discussion of reality-based art, as the performances which thrust them into the national spotlight were infused with autobiographical material. Tim Miller is a writer, dancer, and performance artist who has been creating solo and group work for the past two decades. A California native, Miller joined the performance art scene in New York City in the early 1980s, a time during which he has described himself as full of, “that post-punk expressiveness.”⁴⁶ He has produced numerous pieces since then, including Postwar (1981), Cost of Living (1983), Democracy In America (1984), Buddy Systems (1985), Sex/Love/Stories (1991), My Queer Body (1992), Naked Breath (1994), and Fruit Cocktail (1996). Many selections from these pieces are collected in his book Shirts and Skin (1997), which blends performance texts with traditional memoir to tell the story of his life. Miller is

⁴⁶ Quoted in Steven Durland, “An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul: An Interview with Tim Miller,” TDR 35, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 174. See also Sally Banes, Subversive Expectations: Performance and Paratheater in New York, 1976-85 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 110-111 for a concise biography of Miller.

also an artistic director of the Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica and is known for his dedication to ACT UP and its social activist agenda. He has received numerous grants and awards for his work, including several from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Rockefeller grant.

Miller's performances mix snippets of (presumably) autobiographical text with dance, visual art, props, and occasionally, especially early in his career, other actors. A strong sense of the freedom, playfulness, and experimentation of his early collaborations at such spaces as P.S. 122 is apparent in Miller's own description of his early works: "In these pieces I got to do things that I had always wanted to do. I did a crazed punkish barking-seal dance with Peter after we had placed clothespins on each other's nipples . . . I was part of numerous collaborative projects in which my friends and I would go into the countryside for a week at a time, not speaking, communicating only with our bodies."⁴⁷ Miller's early experiments seem to be much more about play and community than formal artistic goals. Sally Banes has written glowingly of these early performances: "For Tim Miller, performance is about being yourself in public, but it is also a moral act, the carrying out of a necessary action. And necessary action encompasses love, the making of communities, and the discovery of grace as well as danger and violence."⁴⁸ Even in this early stage, Miller's aesthetic repeatedly evokes questions and concerns about the reality of the performing body and the quest for a performance of authentic experience: "We would try anything, no matter how risky, if it might pull us to a more authentic way

⁴⁷ Tim Miller, Shirts and Skin (Los Angeles: Alyson Publication, 1997), 125.

⁴⁸ Banes, Subversive Expectations, 113.

of being. In my desire to channel Russian futurist Vladimir Mayakovski, I chained myself inside a foot locker and set Russian newspapers on fire all around me. Only a quick thinking audience member with a bucket of water saved me from the burn unit.”⁴⁹ While reminiscent of early performance and endurance art works which challenged notions of “reality” by imperiling the performer’s body on stage, Miller’s description is both more playful and self-consciously ironic than the formal sensibilities and/or imminent physical danger of artists like Chris Burden or Stelarc.⁵⁰ His earliest performances combined a hearty over-the-top sensibility with collaborative work in a particular performance community.

His subsequent works, however, including those which incurred the wrath of the NEA attackers, have been more immediately political and more likely to be performed solo. Sally Banes describes this later work as a mixture of “free-associative autobiographical musing, documentation of political or social crisis, slide projections, loud sounds, movements that seem dangerously on the edge of losing control, and a boyishly brash presence that makes you care about the childhood memories and dreams he recounts.”⁵¹ Miller has come to prefer working and performing solo, particularly because he is drawn to the political efficacy of reality-based solo work: “I don’t think I was good at large group pieces. They were my worst pieces. The message, the intent, became clouded. I have a deep belief in autobiography and in creating identity and

⁴⁹ Miller, Shirts and Skin, 126.

⁵⁰ See C. Carr, On Edge, for further description and analysis of this work.

⁵¹ Banes, Subversive Expectation, 134-5.

representation. It's the main job of performance."⁵² Miller's interest in autobiography, specifically, in telling autobiographical stories of his sexual activities, were an important part of his aesthetic, and, not coincidentally, that aspect of his art (combined with his propensity to perform nude) which would evoke right-wing furor in the NEA debates.

Miller often asserts his desire to emphasize the visceral details of his sexual history. For example, his notes on "Naked Breath" in the anthology O Solo Homo claim: "I wrote Naked Breath because I wanted to write a piece of performance that was full of the raw and intimate stickiness of blood and cum."⁵³ The published text of "Naked Breath" contains much language and imagery which bears out his intention. One section describes a sexual encounter with an HIV positive man: "Andrew came on his belly and chest, and then so did I. I leaned over him and kissed him as I dragged this cross on this bathtub chain through that cum. Mixing it up. Now, no chemistry class has ever taught me this experiment. I had to learn it myself."⁵⁴ The mixture of bodily fluids with religious symbols is tellingly reminiscent of the Serrano controversy which had occupied the NEA and the popular press the year before Miller was defunded. Miller's use of this imagery in an autobiographical (read, true) narrative offers evidence of precisely the identity positions and personal practices the religious right sought to suppress with their campaign. His celebration of the his sexualized body and its (always suspect) fluids deconstructs the idealized body of the cultural imagination.

⁵² Quoted in Durland, "An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul," 176.

⁵³ Tim Miller quoted in David Román and Holly Hughes, O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

Furthermore, Miller's insistence upon and celebration of these stories of bodily substance are the artistic means to intentionally political ends. Miller's passionate dedication to ACT UP is one indication of his contention that art must serve social goals. In "Stretch Marks," which is partially focused on ACT UP demonstrations against the Los Angeles County General Hospital, Miller describes the real-life "performance" of the activists involved: "People have passed seven days and seven nights in front of this building together . . . soup has been made . . . stories been told . . . performances been done . . . TV cameras pointed . . . sex been had . . . because demands have been made . . . demands to this country to help our people live."⁵⁵ In much of Miller's work, art and political action are intertwined, owing much to Miller's self-consciously political and anti-formalist belief that, "work should be *about* things."⁵⁶ Miller's performances emphatically celebrate the presence and history of his performing body and insist that this body be understood within a political context. In this way, he constantly troubles the boundaries between art and life.

Holly Hughes, like Miller, creates solo performances which blend autobiography and fantasy in a celebration of alternative sexuality. Also like Miller, she began her performance career by creating collaborative, fictional theatre pieces very different from her later solo performance work. Hughes's first work is associated with the WOW Café, an erstwhile coffee house and performance space located in the East Village. The Café was created to provide a safe and supportive lesbian space for both performance and

⁵⁵ Tim Miller, "Stretch Marks," *TDR* 35, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 164.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Durland, "An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul," 174.

community building, which Hughes describes as “an unspoken but shared vision of making theatre and making community.”⁵⁷ In the introduction to her collected works, she celebrates the freedom and fellowship she discovered at WOW: “This was the family I’d dreamed, my real family. And here we were together, right in the place I knew we would be. WOW was the place I’d always wanted to visit – the mysterious mystery spot. Here we were invisible from the beaten path. Going too far was the only way to go.”⁵⁸ The performances developed at WOW were often campy, over-the-top satires of popular culture.⁵⁹ Hughes characterizes the aesthetic at the Café as “more Charles Ludlum than Jane Chambers; its view of the human condition more Gilligan’s Island than Waiting for Godot,” and claims that her personal motivation for playwrighting was “to meet girls.”⁶⁰ Her early plays, such as The Well of Horniness (c.1983, published by Grove Press 1988) and The Lady Dick (1985) were multi-character lesbian parodies. Hughes gives much credit for these works and their style to both the environment of the WOW Café and her own lesbian desire. Her sexual identity, already important in her early work, would ultimately become a key focus during the the NEA controversy.

⁵⁷ Holly Hughes, Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁹ See Alisa Solomon, “The WOW Café,” in A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance, ed. Carol Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 42-51; Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988); and Sue-Ellen Case, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 282-299.

⁶⁰ Hughes, Clit Notes, 18, 16.

Hughes eventually began to develop and perform solo works based on autobiographical stories, often concerning her experiences as an out lesbian in search of love, sex, and relationships. When asked about this shift, Hughes, who has often identified herself as “a writer who also performs,” claims that she was working on World Without End (1989) when she suddenly thought, “This is a solo piece I could perform.”⁶¹ She mentions the economic appeal of solo performance, but also claims that the potential political efficacy of solo work was an important part of her attraction to the form: “A lot of solo performance work is being done by people who come out of these marginalized groups, outsider groups, and want to disrupt the official narrative that’s either erased or distorted them.”⁶² Hughes’s work from the era focuses on her experiences as a girl, young woman, and adult, struggling always to find a way to express and embrace her lesbianism, often within the context of the nuclear family. She often performs her monologues wearing attractive, often vintage-looking party dresses, one obvious symbol of traditional femininity. Her appearance often confounds traditional stereotypes about what a lesbian “looks” like: “I’m often told, ‘You’re not like those ugly, angry dykes!’ And then I show them that they’re wrong. I am very ugly, and very angry.”⁶³ Hughes has developed a style which combines parodic humor with biting social commentary in performances which use real material to require a reconsideration of such concepts as lesbianism, femininity, family, and desire.

⁶¹ Quoted in Savran, The Playwright’s Voice , 70.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁶³ Quoted in Juno and Vale, 98.

World Without End, which is a meditation on Hughes's relationship with her mother before and after her mother's death, is the work most often referred to in the NEA debates. It is occupied with questions about lesbian identity, as Hughes herself describes her fascination with her own identity and her mother's (deceased) body: "But there was something besides her body that wouldn't go away. Burning questions that I had about what it meant to be a lesbian, what it meant to be white. . . I wrapped my arms around my mother's body, and my questions and I jumped into the flames. World Without End is the record of how we burned."⁶⁴ Hughes explicitly locates this work in the context of lesbian desire, but also firmly positions herself within the nuclear family. This kind of juxtaposition would prove extremely troubling to those social critics who would prefer to locate the lesbian subject always and exclusively outside the sacrosanct American nuclear family. For example, Wildmon's staunchly anti-gay American Family Association was one of the most vocal organizations in the highly successful letter-writing campaign against the NEA Four. Their success indicates the extent to which Hughes's use of real material to document her lesbian identity threatens traditional assumptions about the American family.

Hughes uses the story of her relationship with her mother (and, importantly, her mother's sexuality) to investigate her own lesbian identity and to comment on socio-political issues such as domestic violence and homophobia. She also occasionally inserts direct references to contemporary events, such as the murder of seven-year old Lisa Steinberg at the hands of her father, further grounding her text in reality.⁶⁵ After the

⁶⁴ Hughes, Clit Notes, 154.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

controversy began, however, most attention focused on the part of the performance in which Hughes describes how her mother taught her about female anatomy and sexuality. In the most famous scene, Hughes's mother takes her adolescent daughter into the bathroom, removes her own clothes, and displays her body to her daughter:

Mama says: "Holly, if something's bothering you, and you want to know the answer to it, just remember the answer is inside you." And with that she reached inside herself, and then she pulled her hand out. I could see how wet she was. And the smell? Let me tell you about the smell. That smell made me want to do the mashed potato. I don't know why, but I just felt like dancing. Me and my naked mother dancing in the split-level.⁶⁶

Hughes openly explores female sexuality within the taboo context of the mother-daughter relationship and affirms and celebrates the presence of lesbian desire in the heart of split-level suburbia. This passage also recalls Miller's impulse to celebrate the body and its fluids. While popular pornographic discourse has long celebrated the "wet-ness" of female sexuality, Hughes co-opts this language to re-write the female coming-of-age narrative in terms both celebratory and saturated with lesbian desire. In the conflict which ensued, it became clear that the fluids of the sexualized female body were as culturally suspect as the blood, semen, saliva and sweat which poured from the gay male AIDS patient in the overactive imagination of the political and cultural right.

Indeed, body fluids were also an important part of the controversial material in the work of John Fleck. Specifically, Fleck urinated on stage during several of his pieces,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

and this became the focus of much of the subsequent controversy. Fleck, a California-based performance artist, has worked most frequently on the West Coast; he lives in Los Angeles to facilitate his continued work in mainstream film and television. He has, however, performed in many key New York performance venues, including P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace. BLESSED Are All the Little FISHES is one piece Fleck was performing when the NEA controversy broke. In it, Fleck combines a rambling, stream-of-consciousness monologue with props and movement in a jumbled and purposefully cluttered exploration of religious, familial, and scatological themes. The piece is divided into two “acts,” the first of which traces, “a man’s binge – the beginning of a drunken man’s deluded and dysfunctional journey through his life.”⁶⁷ This “drunken man” stumbles through a “surreal, nightmarish environment” throughout the first half of the piece. In the second half, Fleck appears as “John” (himself?) and performs a rambling monologue about religion, psychotherapy, sex, and AIDS as he wanders around in the audience and in the mess he has made of the stage.

To begin the first half, Fleck, wrapped in toilet paper, uses a toilet to roll himself onto the stage. The soundtrack includes snippets of recognizable television patter, including the voice of televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. His character subsequently hears “the voice of God” emanating from the toilet bowl, once again evoking the mixture of religious and scatological imagery which had caused such controversy in the Serrano controversy. This moment leads to the most talked-about and controversial element of the performance: Fleck urinating on stage:

⁶⁷ John Fleck, BLESSED Are All the Little FISHES, TDR 35, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 179-191.

MAN: Holy shit, I'm having a fucking miracle in my toilet. (*He runs around to the rear of the toilet – flowers emerge from its tank. He begins to change the toilet into a religious shrine. The seat comes down, revealing a picture of Christ taped to the lid. There are birthday candles on the seat that he lights. He takes out of the tank a crucifix that is also a microphone. He sings a beautiful aria in a piercing soprano falsetto.*)⁶⁸

As he urinates, the “MAN” character reads aloud from the Bible, thus further coupling the sacred and the profane:

And God said, ‘Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear and it was so.’ (*He takes out his penis in his hand.*) And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that have life.’ (*The MAN begins to urinate into the toilet bowl.*)⁶⁹

Eventually, Fleck begins to pull various items out of the toilet bowl, including a loaf of bread and a live goldfish. He transfers the goldfish to a bowl, and proceeds to “feed” the goldfish the entire loaf of bread in an increasingly frenzied fashion. Eventually, he is stopped by an actor planted in the audience, who storms the stage in angry protest over the treatment of the fish.⁷⁰

Obviously, then, Fleck confounds the boundaries between the real and the fictional in many ways in this performance. The toilet is “real.” as is the goldfish. Fleck

⁶⁸ Fleck, BLESSED Are All the Little FISHES, 181.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷⁰ This performance moment, however, is itself inspired by actual events; one of Fleck’s first performances of the piece was interrupted by just such an audience member.

actually urinates, but he does everything in the guise of a drunken character called “MAN.” To complicate matters further, Fleck has repeatedly claimed that his intention in performance is to plumb the depths of his own psyche and that “MAN” represents Fleck’s own alcoholic father.⁷¹ The performance complicates any clear-cut distinction between the real and the fictional. However, in the publicity following the NEA defunding, most writers ignored many of the ways Fleck manipulated the boundaries between reality and art and focused obsessively on the fact that he actually urinated on stage. Much as Hughes’s description of her mother’s sexual instruction became emblematic of her work in the media coverage of the controversy, this toilet scene would become the focus of much of the debate over Fleck’s work. Fleck himself points out: “All the controversy about Little Fishes is about me urinating onstage, which I guess is what the public perceives as dangerous.”⁷² Although male urination scenes are something of a staple in mainstream entertainment, the fact that Fleck actually urinated, thus insisting on the permeable boundaries of his real body, provided a convenient target for the cultural anxiety over the uncontrolled body fluids of the gay male body.

Tellingly, the critical defense of Fleck’s performance practice failed to provide any non-literal interpretation of the work. Fleck claims that any reading of his work which implies his intention was to degrade the image of Christ is far off base: “I’ve been criticized for peeing on Jesus Christ, but I never did that. It was very innocent. This man really believed that Jesus Christ was speaking to him through his bodily functions –

⁷¹ See Linda Frye Burnham, “An Unclassified Number: An Interview with John Fleck,” TDR 35, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 192-197.

⁷² Quoted in Burnham, “An Unclassified Number,” 195.

through his vomit and his urine *and* while he was reading the Bible. Growing up, I remember miracles always happening in gold light and golden showers. It was beautiful.”⁷³ As in the Serrano case, much of the criticism and controversy which ensued stems from the critics’ inability to make any non-literal reading of the real material used in the art work. No metaphoric, symbolic, or aesthetic option is allowed; the artist’s use of his physical body, specifically, viscerally charged body fluids, precludes any possible artistic intention the artist may have had.

It is worth noting that John Fleck has received far less media coverage than the other three defunded performers. This may have something to do with the fact that Fleck is not solely identified as a performance artist. He also works steadily in mainstream entertainment, appearing in such commercial media ventures as the Police Academy films and television programs ranging from Murder One to Mad About You. This mainstream status works in two ways to disassociate Fleck from the full force of the controversy. First, he does not rely on the avant-garde art world to support his life’s work. Unlike Miller, Hughes, and Finley, who support themselves by performing, writing, making art and teaching about performance, Fleck has an important source of income not dependent upon the critics, educators and arts professionals who were caught up on the controversy. Second, his mainstream popular entertainment work allows him to play a variety of fictional characters. These fictional movie and tv roles somehow insulate him from the “artist as art” assumptions which fueled much of the NEA debate and its attendant anxiety over identity politics.

⁷³ Ibid.

If Fleck has somehow eluded the full force of the media attention, Karen Finley, on the other hand, has received a disproportionately high level of mainstream press. The number of articles, reviews, and opinion pieces about Finley published in the wake of the NEA defunding actually exceed the total of those published about the other three artists combined. Finley is markedly different from the other three defunded performers in several key ways. One of the most important is that, unlike the other three, she is not gay and does not identify her work as “gay” work. Although there is often homosexual content in the text of her performances, she is a straight, white woman, who interviewers often describe in terms which emphasize her traditional sexuality, appearance, and manner.⁷⁴ Her orthodox looks belie her confrontational and graphic performance style. Her work is controversial in part because we expect better behavior from an attractive, straight white woman from Chicago. Her transgression of these cultural expectations is part of her work’s threat.

In some ways, the cultural right had chosen an apt example of the genre to use as their anti-performance art poster girl. By 1990, Finley had achieved some measure of prominence as a feminist artist who combines rage, sexuality, and social criticism in a pageant of strife played out on her own body. In a TDR article published just weeks prior to the onset of the controversy, performance artist and writer Jon Erickson claims that in light of her confrontational vulgarity, Finley exemplifies “a new strain of women writer-performers . . . who through excessive, obsessive and obscene articulations that combine

⁷⁴ See Laura Shapiro, “A One-Woman Tour of Hell,” Newsweek, 6 August 1990, 60-61; and Amy Linn, “Raising Hell: The Beauty and the Beastliness of Karen Finley,” Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, 7 April 1991, 16-20, 32, 36-37.

twisted sexual practices with the violence of power relations, appropriate what has been the essentially male voice of pornographic discourse.”⁷⁵ Erickson sees Finley’s “appropriation” of the pornographic voice as a laudable attempt to destabilize existing power relations, and he is not alone in praising her political and artistic strategies. A 1992 article in ARTNews claims that when certain people attempt to define “performance art,” they “merely refer to the work of a single contemporary artist – Karen Finley.”⁷⁶

Finley’s work, which was lauded by many academic and cultural critics but denounced by conservative politicians, merits specific attention here, although the performances were so often described by the media in the summer of 1990 and after that the exercise comes to seem a bit superfluous. Setting aside for the moment the fact that many of the media sources who reported on Finley’s work had never actually seen her perform, descriptions of her actions and text prevailed with great frequency in the popular and academic press.⁷⁷ Finley’s work at the time actually exemplifies many of the characteristics of performance art as it had developed by the early and mid 1980s. She usually performed solo and combined performance strategies from both the visual art and theatrical worlds. In the months leading up to the controversy, she often worked late at night in the small clubs where performance art had thrived. Carr gives this description of the atmosphere at one Finley performance:

⁷⁵ Erickson, 230.

⁷⁶ Mifflin, 84.

⁷⁷ The fact that so many people wrote about what they “had not seen” foreshadowed one of the central conflicts of the “victim art” controversy, when Arlene Croce reviewed Still/Here without having seen it.

Finley performs on the club circuit, wafting on the stage in her polyester good-girl getup at one or two in the morning to wail like some degenerate apparition about incest, priests' assholes, the cum on the bedpost, bulimics upchucking in their stilettos. The fuck-and-shit vocabulary draws shrieks, back-talk, occasional hysteria from the rowdy drunk crowds.⁷⁸

Even Carr, an ardent supporter, does not deny that Finley's work is scatological, graphic, and confrontational. Carr goes on to describe the audience responses to Finley's work, which on this occasion include angry insults and lit cigarettes being hurled at the stage.⁷⁹

If the performance conditions of Finley's club work transgressed nearly every social nicety of theatre-going, her content was no less challenging. Erickson describes her subject matter as including "incest, child abuse, patricide, suicide, castration, and cannibalism. Although its outrage and violence is predominantly aimed at upwardly mobile and greedy males who walk on the bodies of the poor in America, her sarcasm targets almost everyone."⁸⁰ Finley's content and language are both self-consciously political and overtly challenging. The work is designed to confront the spectator and elicit a powerful response.

⁷⁸ Carr, "Unspeakable Practices," 141.

⁷⁹ Finley's work has engendered much discussion about questions of audience reception. See, for example, Catherine Schuler, "Spectator Response and Comprehension: The Problem of Karen Finley's Constant State of Desire," TDR 34, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 131-141 and subsequent responses in TDR. See also Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic, 65-67.

⁸⁰ Jon Erickson, "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley," Theatre Journal 42, no. 1 (May 1990), 227.

For example, The Constant State of Desire describes such anti-social activities as rape, incest, and castration. One often-cited section is provocatively titled “Cut Off Balls,” and contains Finley’s fantastical act of revenge against the corporate malefactors she feels are responsible for the problems of society:

So I gather all their balls, scrotum, testicles and stick ‘em in my mouth. I roll ‘em around my mouth and I feel like a squirrel in heat. I love the sound of scrotum. I take the balls home and boil them . . . After I boil the balls I roll them in my own dung, my manure. ‘Cause I’m the queen of the Dung Dynasty. Then I roll the Dung eggs in melted Hershey’s Kisses. Then I roll the scrotum, manure, chocolate-coated balls into fancy foiled papers from found Eurotrash cigarette boxes . . . I love to see 9-year-old boys who only communicate with computers eat their daddies’ balls.⁸¹

This is just one of many examples of the violent, sexually explicit, and combative language Finley uses in performance. In other sections of this same piece, she describes a father sexually abusing his young daughter with various vegetables, proclaims a desire to stick Cuisanarts up the “asses” of Wall Street entrepreneurs, and, assuming a male personae, describes the act of sodomizing “his” own mother.⁸² Her text is violent and confrontational by any measure.

⁸¹ Karen Finley, “The Constant State of Desire,” in A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance, ed. Carol Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 296. Finley’s work, including a slightly altered version of this text, is collected in Shock Treatment (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990).

⁸² Finley, “The Constant State of Desire,” 301, 296, 300.

Finley claims she performs this dialogue of violence and obscenity to draw attention to the plight of those disenfranchised by late-capitalist American society. In sprinkling references to the products of consumer culture throughout her text, she locates the source of social injustice not in personal failing but in the social and commercial practices that always exploit the powerless in pursuit of capital gain. It has often been pointed out that her language is not necessarily more violent or sexual than that which is used in some mainstream media outlets such as rap music or pornographic film. However, those popular culture forms generally work in accordance with the requirements of our capitalist, corporate system of profit. Finley's work upsets these circuits of finance because it is, as performance, in many ways unreproducible, and because its status as performance art locates it in a particularly feminist and socially aware community.

Tellingly, much of the mainstream media flap over Finley's work more or less ignores her diatribe of sexually explicit and violent images, focusing instead on how she manipulates her body on stage. Finley uses her body as the primary medium of addressing her politically-oriented topics. She resolutely emphasizes the body of the performer by manipulating, exposing, displaying, defiling and celebrating her body on stage. In performance, Finley often uses food as a prop (and, in some ways, costume). One stage direction for The Constant State of Desire reads: "Easter basket and stuffed animals sit on table. Take off clothes. Put colored unboiled eggs from basket and animals in one large clear-plastic bag. Smash contents till contents are yellow. Put mixture on body using soaked animals as applicators. Sprinkle glitter and confetti on

body and wrap self in paper garlands as boas.”⁸³ In an interview with Richard Schechner, Finley has described this image as both a critique of “violence against women” and “a celebration.”⁸⁴ Carr describes her use of food in We Keep Our Victims Ready: “Here, she uses food ritualistically, smearing chocolate as she talks about female victimization. Because women are treated like shit. Slowly, she recreates herself, applying sprouts, red candy, and tinsel. By the end, she seems to be wearing some strange and beautiful costume.”⁸⁵ This is precisely the moment which would become the focus of the controversy, lending itself to Finley’s designation as “the chocolate-smearing young woman.”

Although Finley’s matter-of-fact application of the food to her body is meant to deconstruct traditional, masculine erotic fantasies about women and food which proliferate in the popular imagination, the artistic and subversive intent of the author was completely lost in the media outpouring which was to follow. In the end, what she *said* did not matter, because of what she *did*. She played with her food, and thus transgressed the polite social order which figures women as those who buy, who prepare, who serve, who save, who consume – in short, those who treasure what we eat. By symbolically disrupting this order, Finley marked herself as a potential target for those conservative social activists who needed a threatening force to market to the American public in their

⁸³ Ibid., 294.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Richard Schechner, “Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming,” in A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance ed. Carol Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 261.

⁸⁵ Carr, On Edge, 255.

attempts to raise money. Once Finley's name and bodily bad behavior were made common knowledge, the right-wing could turn its wrath on performance art with full abandon.

The focus on Finley's body makes sense, however, since excessive bodily display is one feature which all of the NEA Four have in common. In all cases, there is not just an insistence on the expressive, performing body, but a self-conscious awareness that the body is most compelling and most provocative as its own boundaries are interrogated and transgressed. In an article in The Nation, Arthur Danto discusses this aspect which unites the various art challenged in the NEA debacle, claiming it is all "art that includes representations of body parts, fluids, and products." He goes on to disdain the NEA's corporeal fear: "[S]ociety does not benefit when art's main funding agency collaborates in making the body unmentionable, mechanical, pathological and distant."⁸⁶ In 1990, at the initial height of the AIDS epidemic, the National Endowment and the American imagination could not accommodate art which celebrated the suspect, dangerous fluidity of the marginalized body. The semen, urine, vaginal secretions, and uncontained food the performers celebrated on stage raised the terrifying specter of the potential uncontrollable connection between the artist and the audience.

Another important connection between the four artists is their sincere desire to create art which has real world effects, both on them personally and on society at large. Hughes explains that she wrote World Without End about her mother's death because "it was the only way of dealing with the pain of my mother's death and how it impacted

⁸⁶ Arthur Danto, "Vile Bodies," The Nation, 8 June 1992, 772.

me.”⁸⁷ She subsequently hopes her use of real-life experience will effect social change: “I think about the way that solo-autobiographical work relates to the tradition of witnessing and testifying that’s been so much a part of social change movements.”⁸⁸ In response to the attack on the NEA, Fleck exhorts his fellow artists in terms which expose his political persuasion: “Performance has got to be done with as strong and vociferous an attack as ever before. We’ve got to keep addressing the issues, especially sexuality.”⁸⁹ Miller proudly asserts that his “strongest identity is as a part of ACT UP – one of the genuine, authentic social movements of our time” and cautions that “the NEA stuff puts a big, big challenge on us to create some kind of new social contract about what an artist does.”⁹⁰ Finley describes the purpose of her work as “trying to get people angry so they’ll do something . . . I look at my performance as a pep rally – really I think of myself as a motivational speaker!”⁹¹ Finley would be cheerleader for all those closed out of the privilege of American society.

This avowedly leftist aesthetic is precisely what threatens and angers many conservative cultural critics. Anger and anxiety over the true stories and real bodies employed by the NEA Four actually reflects a deep social discomfort with the possibility that identity politics could reorder society as we know it. The defunding of the NEA Four

⁸⁷ Quoted in C. Carr, “No Trace of the Bland: An Interview with Holly Hughes,” *Theater* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 70.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Savran, *The Playwright’s Voice*, 76.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Burnham, “An Unclassified Number,” 196.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Durland, “An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul,” 173-4.

⁹¹ Quoted in Juno and Vale, 49.

is a compelling example of this dynamic. The artists themselves are acutely aware of the role their non-traditional identity plays in the reception of their art. Hughes says: “Really, the prevailing view in this country is that the role of art in this culture is not to disturb anyone . . . But we all know: it’s not just what you say, it’s who you are . . . and what you can get away with.”⁹² In the Spring of 1990, the Right stood ready to ensure that these “alternative” identities,” with or without real-world evidence in their art, would not get away with anything.

The Smear Campaign

In May 1990, the National Council of the Arts met in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to make funding decisions about the artists who had been recommended for grants by their respective peer panels. The Endowment was already deeply embroiled in the very public controversy over the funding of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibits. Things got more complicated when Robert Evans and Richard Novak, long-time syndicated political columnists, published an opinion piece about the NEA in the Washington Post. The editorial focused on Frohnmayer’s pending decision regarding the previously approved grant recipients. Evans and Novak highlight Frohnmayer’s power to veto the typically followed recommendations of the peer review panels. The only performance artist it mentions by name is Finley, who they call a “nude, chocolate-smearing young woman,” characterizing her impending grant as “The Mapplethorpe case

⁹² Quoted in Juno and Vale, 104.

of 1990.”⁹³ Evans and Novak use Finley to mock Frohnmayer’s untenable position as the mediator between supposedly outraged taxpayers and “the formidable arts lobby.”⁹⁴ The writers, who of course hadn’t seen Finley perform, briefly describe the most lurid-sounding moments from her performance, citing a Minneapolis-Star Tribune review:

“[S]he casually peels off her dress and pours gelatin into her bra . . . slathers chocolate over her body . . . sticks blobs of bean sprouts over her body and calls them sperm.”⁹⁵

Focusing only on Finley’s use of food makes her work seem bizarre, exotic, and sexy. It ultimately makes Finley sound foolish and those who would fund her look ludicrous.

The article captured the popular imagination and energized the rapidly burgeoning public debate. Its slick and easy readability, which had nothing to do with Finley or her performance per se, authorized many people, from many different fields, to evaluate and judge performance art. Thus a marginal, edgy artistic form was suddenly accountable not only to every taxpayer in America, but to any politician, media personality, or writer who felt compelled to weigh in on the issue. Because reality-based performance art seems to forego formal artistic criteria in favor of a celebration of the (real) life and body of the artist, various writers and the American public at large felt justified in offering their own under-informed opinions, unmediated by any “expert” critical framework, as Gussow indicates: “People who have little or no conception of the range or purpose of the form now use the words [performance art] with alacrity, as a synonym for anything

⁹³ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The NEA’s Suicide Charge,” Washington Post, 11 May 1990, published in Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 208.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Bolton, 208.

outrageous.”⁹⁶ Carr points out that, “never before had performance attracted this much scrutiny.”⁹⁷ The diverse writers and activists who took up the subject of performance art assumed that the meaning of the work was self-evident.

The most important feature of the Evans and Novak article was the magnificently effective phrase, “nude, chocolate-smearing young woman.” Of course, these words were most deliberately chosen because of their provocative potential. They are at once evocative (she is a nude woman), dismissive (she is young), and sexually titillating (chocolate-smearing). They make Finley sound like an over-sexed, naughty child. This caused the NEA controversy to be rapidly reinscribed in the discourse of straight male sexuality. For months, the rightist establishment had been stumbling over how to expose the public to the homoerotic, sado-masochistic images and coarse bodily fluids of the Mapplethorpe/Serrano controversy without implicating themselves as purveyors of smut. To this end, as previously noted, Helms wrapped the Mapplethorpe images in plain brown envelopes, and as Carr notes: “When Jesse Helms brought his ‘disgusting’ Mapplethorpe photos to the Senate chamber, he asked all the women and adolescent pages to leave.”⁹⁸ Now, the phrase “chocolate-smearing young woman” succinctly evoked the discourse of traditional heterosexual pornography, which is much less threatening to the white male power establishment than AIDS or homoeroticism. This is the kind of misogynist language that power knows what to do with. The politicians assume that their porno-literacy tells them all they need to know about Finley’s work. Finley’s attempts to

⁹⁶ Gussow, C11.

⁹⁷ Carr, *On Edge*, xxi.

⁹⁸ C. Carr, “War on Art,” in *Culture Wars*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 231.

appropriate and undermine the voice of misogynist pornography were thus entirely defeated in the commotion that followed.

Misperceptions and misreadings of her work subsequently spread like wildfire in the popular press, mostly to the titillation of the general public. Time magazine, for example, published a commentary by Andrew Ferguson which sarcastically furthers misunderstandings of the sexuality of Finley's work: "The most famous of the performers, Karen Finley, thrilled audiences by coating herself in chocolate and doing highly inventive autoerotic exercises with sweet potatoes. . . So pass the chocolate and sweet potatoes, and let the good times roll."⁹⁹ Ferguson's demeaning language and erroneous description typify the titillating pornographic character of many responses. US News and World Report ran an anti-Finley article called "Who Should Pay For Porn?" which claims that Finley, "openly rubs canned yams across her vagina."¹⁰⁰ Christopher Rapp titled his National Review comment "Chocoholic," and sneered, "With or without government funding, Karen Finley will bravely smear herself with chocolate."¹⁰¹ His title and his article belittle Finley's efforts to symbolically depict the degradation of women in society. Of course, the authors' condescending tones and inaccurate descriptions and misreadings of Finley's work arise in large part from the fact that they had never seen her in performance. Finley's designation as the "chocolate-smearing young woman" proved extremely effective in generating the kind of national discussion which

⁹⁹ Andrew Ferguson, "Era of Tiny Commotions," Time, 27 October 1997, 132.

¹⁰⁰ David Gergen, "Who Should Pay for Porn?" US News and World Report, 30 July 1990, 80.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Rapp, "Chocoholic," National Review, 20 July 1998, 35.

frustrated the Endowment's decision-making process. For most of the summer, everyone everywhere was talking and writing about obscene art and the NEA.¹⁰²

For John Frohnmayer, the media blitz could not have come at a worse time. In his memoir of the events, Frohnmayer acknowledges that Finley's newfound notoriety had little to do with her or her work specifically: "Karen Finley had been so positioned by Evans and Novak that her symbolic status, rather than her work itself, had become the issue. Without benefit of firsthand knowledge, they had described her as an outrage, a misfit, an insult."¹⁰³ To his credit, Frohnmayer concedes that the criticism of Finley's work had no legitimate basis in the art itself. Later in the same chapter, he admits that he was unqualified to make the kind of aesthetic judgments he took on. Interestingly, he subsequently offers one astute reading of why Finley's art was so infuriating: "In Finley's case, it was not that the imagery failed to work, but that it worked too well. Instead of sensitizing people to the degradation of women . . . it infuriated, threatened, and incited those who settled on it as a symbol of everything that is wrong with 'federal giveaways.' Rather than acting as an invitation to dialogue, it solidified opinion and prejudice."¹⁰⁴ His remarks are curiously reminiscent of Catherine Schuler's concerns about audience comprehension which were published in TDR just weeks before the controversy erupted. Frohnmayer acknowledges both that Finley's symbolic value superseded any real

¹⁰² It is useful to note that although occasional stories have continued to be published as events warranted, the popular media's constant, intense attention to the issues came to an abrupt end when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, 1990. Scholarly and theoretical journals then picked up where the popular press had left off.

¹⁰³ Frohnmayer, 174.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

understanding of her work and that his eventual decision to defund the artists was largely influenced by the public's erroneous interpretations of the artists' intent.

However, it is difficult to hold Frohnmayer blameless in the events that unfolded. His acknowledgment that the defunding decision was primarily politically motivated is at once too much and not enough of an excuse. For example, Frohnmayer can never quite bring himself to defend gay, lesbian, or otherwise overtly sexual performance art. The transcripts of the May 1990 meetings indicate his continued discomfort with the content of the work: "Karen Finley inserts vegetables into her orifices. That is not all her work is about, but that is what is going to be in the press if you fund it . . . Holly Hughes is a lesbian, and her work is very heavily of the genre."¹⁰⁵ In language that is at once vague and haltingly clinical ("orifices?"), Frohnmayer emphasizes how these artists display alternative sexuality. His description of Hughes' work as being of the lesbian "genre" is both baffling and reductive, prompting Hughes to respond, "I didn't know I was a genre writer. Maybe we should have our own funding category."¹⁰⁶ Frohnmayer struggles with the aesthetic qualifications of the art, and has a difficult time maintaining a consistent position about the artists. He first claims that Finley's work was "clearly artistically supportable," but ultimately justifies his rejection by whining: "[I]t was difficult for me to recommend a foul-mouthed, self-indulgent actor who was offensive by design."¹⁰⁷ From a safe distance, he may well be able to articulate his awareness that Finley's symbolism "worked too well," but at the time, Frohnmayer was too caught up in political

¹⁰⁵ Brian Wallis, "Secret Documents Show NEA Bowed to right-wing Pressure," Art in America, November 1991, 41.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Carr, "No Trace of the Bland," 69.

¹⁰⁷ Frohnmayer, 176.

survival to take a stand against those who sought to silence the voices of dissent, anger, queer sexuality and women's rights. His actions indicate the same anxiety over the (real) bodies of the (queer) artists that ignited the controversy to begin with. In late June, he decided to defy the recommendation of the Solo Theatre and Mime Panel and refuse grants to Miller, Hughes, Fleck and Finley.

Finley's inclusion in the defunded four in some ways obscures the patent homophobia which informed the entire debate. It is crucial to remember, however, that Finley was not originally flagged as a potentially controversial artist during the NEA deliberations in the spring of 1990. Only Hughes, Miller, and Fleck were brought to Frohnmayer's attention as artists who would potentially pose a political risk for the Endowment. In his autobiography, Frohnmayer describes his initial concerns over the artists who had been selected for funding in the performance art category. He tells about a series of encounters with the panel of experts who had evaluated grant applications and made recommendations about which artists to fund:

I reconvened the panelists by a conference telephone call to try to get further information from them. I asked them particularly to clarify the artistic merit of the proposals from Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck . . . since these were the three applicants about which the most questions seemed to persist.¹⁰⁸

Tellingly, Frohnmayer does not indicate what "questions" were being asked about these performers, nor who was asking them, and Finley is not included in the questionable group. Finley was added later, after the Evans and Novak article brought her to the

¹⁰⁸ Frohnmayer, 152.

attention of the national media. The three artists who were originally at stake in the defunding decision were all openly gay. Considering that Finley was not considered questionable by the NEA chair until after the Evans and Novak article, it seems clear that her vilification in the national media made defunding anyone politically viable. The media attacks on her work created the socially justifiable means to silence the reality-based work of Miller, Hughes, and Fleck.

Of course, lurking somewhere in the logic of Frohnmayer's decision was a deep suspicion of the way these artists and this form skew the boundaries between the imaginary and the real. The most obvious confusion between reality and art in this initial controversy was the vast uproar over Finley's manipulation of her body on stage, which her supporters praised and her detractors vilified. Mifflin comments: "Finley is her own artwork. She usually undergoes a physical transformation during the course of a performance, draping her polemics in visual dressing . . . she uses her body as a canvas. . . For better or for worse, she has inspired a generation of new artists to search themselves for similar reserves of truth."¹⁰⁹ Repeatedly, the national media echoed the idea that Finley's body was "her own artwork," which ultimately further confounded the complicated relationship between art and self, and exposed Finley to the castigation of those with a vested interest in the clear distinction between life and art. In one ironic sense, Finley's detractors themselves manipulated the boundaries between real and imaginary, to great political effect; their descriptions of her work, and most often their criticism of same, were more informed by the wild imaginings of the cultural right than the real experience of seeing Finley perform.

¹⁰⁹ Mifflin, 86.

The Aftermath

Enormous publicity had already been generated by the Mapplethorpe/Serrano NEA controversy, and Evans and Novak had timed the appearance of their attack to coincide with the closely-watched meeting of the National Council on the Arts. The media, therefore, were primed to pounce on this new controversy at the Endowment. Over the course of the summer, the New York Times ran articles on the National Endowment and performance art at least ten times.¹¹⁰ In addition, within months articles appeared in Time, Newsweek, US News and World Report, New York, The New Republic, The Nation, The Advocate, The New Yorker, Publisher's Weekly, The Humanist, Omni, Insight on the News, Art in America, ArtNews, American Theatre, and of course People Weekly.¹¹¹ By the end of the summer, millions of Americans who had

¹¹⁰ All of the following articles appear in the Times: Michael Brenson, "Effects of Male Desires on the Lives of Women," 21 May 1990, C13(L); Mary Cantwell, "Annapolis and Karen Finley," 25 May 1990, A26(L); Marcelle Clements, "Karen Finley's Rage," 22 July 1990, H5,7(L); Stephen Holden, "Finley Mocks Her Critics in Her Art," 24 July 1990, C1(L); Holly Hughes and Richard Elovich, "Homophobia and the NEA," 28 July 1990, A15; Mel Gussow, "Artist as Art," 1 August 1990, C11, 15(L); William H. Honan, "Two Who Lost Grants," 2 August 1990, C19(L); William H. Honan, "Disputed Arts Grants to be Reconsidered," 5 August 1990 A24(L); "Arts Endowment Rejects Appeals," 25 August 1990, C12(L); Larry Rohter, "4 Performance Artists Sue," 28 September 1990, C12(L).

¹¹¹ In addition to previously cited articles, see Robert Hughes, "Whose Art is it, Anyway?" Time, 4 June 1990, 46-48; Michael Lassell, "NEA Four Survive Year of Uproar," The Advocate, 3 December 1991, 76-9; Howard Fields, "NEA Moves Closer to Funding," Publisher's Weekly, 26 October 1990; Elizabeth Licata, "Let Us Now Praise Infamous Women," The Humanist, May-June 1991, 15-20; Arthur Miller, "In the Ayes of the Beholders," Omni, February 1991, 10; Elena Neuman, "Art's Magnet for Controversy," Insight on the News, 30 December 1991, 10-15; Robin Cembalest, "Dread and Chocolate," ARTNews, November 1991, 44-46; Alisa Solomon, "Art Attack," American Theatre, June 1992, 18-26.

never even heard of performance art before knew that Finley was “chocolate-smearred.” Suddenly, everyone, including many who had no other exposure to performance art, felt authorized to question its merit. In lieu of any artistic or intellectual debate about art or its standards, the politicians and other cultural critics who entered the fray could activate the language of pornography and make endless puns about the erotics and childishness of Finley’s art, creating a journalistic feeding frenzy. Carr responds angrily to critics who “mocked Finley by focusing on food. [They] said her work was all about stuffing yams, just as the others say it’s all about smearred chocolate. None of these Wrathful Dads has ever seen her. They write in that vacuum called male entitlement.”¹¹² Carr’s remark points to the inherent paternalism and sexism which surfaces in so much of the subsequent rhetoric.

One excellent example is an essay in US News and World Report by David Gergen. Gergen accurately sums up the right wing’s general assessment of the artists in question: “They want to engage in wanton destruction of a nation’s values, and they expect that same nation to pay their bills. Grow up, friends. No society, even one as tolerant as this one has usually been, is going to pay for its own demise.”¹¹³ Gergen’s paternalistic tone (he wants these artists to “grow up”) and his notion that the art in question was not only immoral but dangerous was typical of the responses generated by various right-leaning critics. Many other attackers also read the performances as threatening so-called traditional American ideals. In one bizarre instance, Christopher Rapp asserts that funding the free expression of such art “perverts the idea of freedom

¹¹² Carr, “War on Art,” 235.

¹¹³ Gergen, 80.

itself.”¹¹⁴ Often, these articles exploit an overblown sense of patriotism, and warn that this kind of art must be quashed as a national threat. Pat Robertson, who, with Donald Wildmon, had launched a political letter-writing, fund-raising, and advertising campaign against the National Endowment, swiftly adopted the strategy of positioning themselves as the nation’s best defense against a threatening, left-wing attack. Their so-called defense of traditional American values rapidly acquired a patently offensive rhetoric. They ran a full-page ad in *USA Today* challenging, Clint Eastwood style: “Vote for the NEA appropriation . . . And make my day.”¹¹⁵ Most often, the language of the debate was angry, condescending, and threatening. Interestingly enough, in their attempt to reject and contain the representations of marginal bodies and experiences, these writers employed an angry rhetoric similar to that volatile speech they sought to suppress.

While many who attacked performance art lacked any formal training in art criticism or performance art, quite a few art professionals sided with the cultural Right in their attack on the NEA Four. Often, these critics dismiss reality-based performance art as a vain attempt to shock the complacent and complicit bourgeois audience. Alice Goldfarb Marquis, a prominent cultural critic and writer, asserts: “[T]hese works claimed to be the protests of victims, but their form – abusive rhetoric and repellent images – preempted free and open discussion of the matter.” She goes on to describe work like Finley’s as “tasteless,” “depraved,” and “insulting.” Like many other critics, Marquis claims that the artists involved were courting intense media scrutiny and benefiting from

¹¹⁴ Rapp, 35.

¹¹⁵ The advertisement, which appeared in *USA Today* on June 20th, 1990, is reproduced in Bolton, 316. See also Frohnmayer, 175-6, for a narrative account of the Christian Coalition’s tactics during this era.

the publicity of the controversy: “A self-styled avant-garde has been increasingly thrusting itself into media attention with strident political and sexual ‘art.’”¹¹⁶ By conflating the art works with the artists themselves, a move no doubt facilitated by the art’s reliance on autobiography and bodily display, many critics figured the artists as self-interested social activists, out to profit from any and all attention they could get.

Robert Brustein laments the perceived increasing emphasis on social activism in theatre art with his compellingly titled Dumbocracy in America, in which he claims:

To fail to respond to plays about blacks or women or homosexuals, for example, is to stand accused of racism, sexism, homophobia, or getting up on the wrong side of the bed. Meanwhile, the theatre becomes an agency for consciousness raising, with audiences being tutored and entertained for considerably less money than a modest contribution to an effective rehabilitation program.¹¹⁷

Brustein assumes that his critical privilege is impaired by the real-life material the artists employ. This argument would become crucial to the victim art controversy. However, his own language exposes his belief that it is the plays of “blacks or women or homosexuals” which generate this critical inability. In Brustein’s analysis, the identity of the performer is what actually threatens critical authority. Again, these critical rejections of reality-based art indicate less an aesthetic concern over the destruction of the art-life

¹¹⁶ Marquis, Art Lessons, 212, 215. Frohnmayer’s assessment that the NEA Four were “offensive by design” also expresses the idea that these artists were “asking for it.”

¹¹⁷ Robert Brustein, Dumbocracy in America: Studies in the Theatre of Guilt 1987-1994 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 15-16.

binary than a serious cultural anxiety over the possible reorganization of the social order in light of marginalized identity politics.

By far the two most common liberal responses to attacks on the NEA were to call the attackers “homophobic” and subsequently accuse the Endowment of “censorship.” Holly Hughes herself was extremely vocal in response to the unfolding events, flat-out accusing the Endowment of homophobia in a New York Times editorial.¹¹⁸ Hughes also was quoted as fantasizing that John Frohnmayer “woke in the morning and slithered on his belly to Jesse Helms’s door to ask what he could do for him that day.”¹¹⁹ Jesse Helms, for his part, was called “shameful” in an article (not an opinion essay, per se, but an article) published in Time magazine.¹²⁰ Tellingly, though, the arts supporters who rallied around the cause of the NEA Four were much more likely to criticize the Right for censorship than for homophobia.

The accusation of censorship was applied with abandon. The liberal idealists who were now called upon to defend the National Endowment actually differed widely in their evaluations of the work and their opinions about what to do next, but they could all agree that government censorship was a bad thing. Over the next few months, The Nation ran articles entitled “From Comstockery to Helmsmanship,” “A Decency Czar,” and “Art vs. The Uniculture,” among others.¹²¹ The Progressive evoked the horrific specter of Nazi

¹¹⁸ Holly Hughes and Richard Elovich, “Homophobia and the NEA,” The New York Times, 28 July 1990, A15.

¹¹⁹ See Frohnmayer, 178.

¹²⁰ Robert Hughes, 48.

¹²¹ Bruce Shapiro, “From Comstockery to Helmsmanship,” The Nation, 1 October 1990, 335-336; Owen Fuss, “A Decency Czar?” The Nation, 15 April 1991, 473; E.L. Doctorow, “Art vs. the Uniculture,” The Nation, 25 November 1991, 675-677.

Germany in an article entitled “The NEA, Jews, and You”: “When censorship links up with government sponsorship of art, the next step – conscious or not – is the establishment of a ‘State Art,’ promoting nationalism over humanity.”¹²² With the Right marching under their “anti-obscenity” banner, the Left’s most obvious response was to attempt to evoke public outrage over the prospect of wide-spread censorship. To the extent that both sides were successful, they obscured many facts about the art itself and the National Endowment. Focusing on questions about censorship deflected attention from the evidence of queer sexuality and alternative identity the artists had worked so diligently to expose. It allowed supporters of the National Endowment to endorse public arts funding without defending the lives and bodies documented in the reality-based art.

After the controversy died down, the NEA quietly did away with all funding to individual artists. In 1998 the NEA Four lost a Supreme Court case claiming that the defunding had infringed on their rights of free expression.¹²³ Although many conservative critics have suggested that the NEA Four ultimately benefited from controversy, the artists themselves assert that the debacle actually did grave damage to their art, their lives, and their psyche.¹²⁴ John Fleck claims: “Because of this whole NEA

¹²² Gregory Conniff, “The NEA, Jews, and You,” The Progressive, February 1991, 11-12.

¹²³ See Mel Gussow, “Artists See No Decency in Ruling on Grants,” New York Times, 2 July 1998, E1+ for a report on the decision and its reception. See also Richard Meyer, “Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?": Holly Hughes and the Case Against Censorship,” Theatre Journal 52, no.4 (December 2000), 543-52 for a description of events at the Supreme Court as related in Hughes’s performance Preaching to the Perverted (1999).

¹²⁴ See William Harris, “The N.E.A. Four: Life After Symbolhood,” The New York Times, 5 June 1994, B1+ for an extended account of the devastating effect of the controversy on each of the artists.

bullshit . . . I feel people are going to be somewhat disappointed by anything I do, and I don't want to try to please them by being controversial and raucous . . . I've been feeling real stuck, just defending myself."¹²⁵ Miller rejects the notion that the notoriety he has endured would have a positive effect on his career or performance art in general: "I'm very careful about seeing a silver lining in any of this, because I think there's very little silver lining. Especially for younger artists. I think this really inhibits younger artists: you won't get money, you won't get support, people will be afraid to present you."¹²⁶ Holly Hughes explicitly rejects the idea that the controversy has brought her rewards: "Certainly we got attention, I got a few gigs, but I think something bigger, more profound, that effects more people was lost. A lot of the artists who were attacked are dead or are not really making performance work anymore."¹²⁷ Although the publicity did bring the artists into the popular imagination for a short while, they contend that its ultimate effect has been devastating.

In the final revision of the art-life saga, Fleck, Finley, Miller and Hughes have all produced new works based on their experiences as part of the NEA Four.¹²⁸ In doing so, they express both a poignant confidence in the aesthetic potential of their life experiences and continued optimism about the potential of performance art to productively destabilize

¹²⁵ Quoted in Burnham, "An Unclassified Number," 192.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Durland, "An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul," 175.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Savran, 83.

¹²⁸ These performances include Fleck's meIII (1995); Finley's The Return of the Chocolate Smearred Woman (1998) and Shut Up and Love Me (2000); Miller's Shirts and Skin (1998); and Hughes's Preaching to the Perverted (1999). Hughes's piece is particularly relevant to this study because her performance text draws on the media misrepresentations of her previous work.

oppressive social constructs. The fact that these artists are still willing to offer their lives and bodies to the audience indicates the valuable role performance art can play in questioning traditional assumptions about gender, sexuality, power, society, and even the nature of reality.

CHAPTER THREE

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH:

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH AND THE PARADOX OF DOCUMENTARY DRAMA

At the very least, language is currency as we create reality.
To abuse language, to lie, is to fray reality.

– Anna Deavere Smith, Talk to Me

Few artists in contemporary theatre have received as much media attention as Anna Deavere Smith. Smith, who is primarily known for writing and performing in Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities (1992) and Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 (1994), has become a ubiquitous figure on the contemporary performing arts scene.¹ In addition to her appearances in popular entertainment like The American President (1996) and The West Wing (2000), she has been the subject of dozens of print articles and reviews, been interviewed on National Public Radio, and appeared on many nationally televised talk shows. Her work has been featured everywhere from The Village Voice to Nightline, and she has become one of the most talked about theatre artists of the decade. Her plays have received an enormous amount of mainstream media coverage, and the discussions they generated within various theatrical and critical communities have been extensive and contentious.

The most contentious debates have focused on the playwright's use of authentic

¹ Anna Deavere Smith, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities (New York: Anchor Books, 1993); and Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

language, and the relationship between this language and the precise genre of the piece. Simply put, Smith creates dramas from recorded interviews. Her plays, which will be the focus of this chapter, dramatize recent historical events in light of their racial and political complexities. Both Fires and Twilight were written in response to volatile racial crises in their respective communities. In Fires, Smith attempts to recreate the events, issues, and implications of an inter-racial conflict between Black Americans and Lubavitch Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Twilight is a dramatic response to the violent social disturbances that rocked Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict. To create her plays, Smith spends weeks conducting recorded interviews with all manner of diverse individuals who have some kind of connection to the subject of her play. She then meticulously recreates the interviewee's dialogue, and, in the case of her two most famous productions, performs all of the text solo, making every effort to provide the audience with an exact replication of the interviewee's speech and mannerisms. Her goal is to evoke the presence of the person interviewed by reproducing their authentic language on stage. The authentic language of the text has caused much confusion over whether the piece was actually theatre or actually journalism, in most cases the two forms being understood as inherently distinct. In this confusion, the play is often held accountable to traditional standards of journalistic objectivity and judged primarily on its ability to present an objective account of the events in question.

Reading the plays as journalism causes much of Smith's theatrical work to be erased. In one striking example, the Pulitzer corporation, after naming Twilight as a finalist for the 1994 prize for drama, withdrew the play from consideration on the grounds that the text of the show was not original. The debate over the relative authenticity of the

language also tends to obscure the difficult subjects Smith addresses: important and complex questions of race, racial differences, and their relation to our notion of American identity. Discussion of the plays is confined to an assessment of Smith's ability to authoritatively secure and transparently present bits of real-life information. This catches Smith and her plays in a double bind. Tied to the notion of authentic text, her plays are held accountable to standards of journalistic objectivity, to which they can never quite live up. Simultaneously, the plays' insistent use of real life material and found text prevent them from being fully understood as theatre. The effusive praise of Smith's objectivity and performance skills effectively erases her creative work and reduces the complex characters she presents to so many journalistic sound bites. The plays thus fall short of the requirements of any traditional genre, leaving them exposed to the whims of the traditional critics. The rejection of her work by the Pulitzer committee provides a locus for exploring the nature of documentary drama and the problems of its critical reception.

Why, ultimately, was the Pulitzer organization unable to reconcile Smith's documentary plays with the traditional requirements of dramatic literature? How did Smith's faith in the power of authentic language ultimately expose her to the criticism of those who would police the boundary between art and life? What characteristics of Smith's art contributed to the erasure of her labor in the productions and in the texts? How is the reception of documentary dramas complicated by the presence of living bodies on stage? What role does race – the race of the author, the subjects, the forms in use – play in these debates? These are the questions this chapter will address.

As documentary drama is certainly not a new dramatic form, one begins to suspect

that the critical tension over Smith's work and its relation to reality actually masks some deeper social fears and concerns. Given the subject of her dramas and the critical emphasis on Smith's performing body on stage, it seems likely that the critical community displayed a pronounced inability to accommodate the racial complexity of the performances and the play texts themselves. Smith's plays ask extremely uncomfortable questions about the state of race relations in America and trouble any simplistic or straightforward understanding of American identity. The documentary evidence she provides to substantiate her portrait of disintegrating race relations is both a compelling theatrical gesture and, ultimately, the means by which the critical community confines her work to an extra-artistic category, effectively enacting a kind of political and artistic containment.

To begin to understand the context for these issues, it's important to briefly review the historical background of documentary drama, focusing on the socially progressive potential documentary drama holds for contemporary theatre. Smith is not the first dramatist to rely on documentary forms; she writes in a long tradition of artists who believe in the dramatic potential of authentic language. Documentary dramatists typically seek a form capable of encapsulating the manifold social pressures and contradictions of the modern world. They have traditionally embraced the idea that language can transparently describe human experience, provided that language is culled from the real world and not tainted by the artifice of imagination. Of particular interest here are those dramas which are specifically and usually exclusively composed of what is often referred to as "found text." This expression describes language culled from extra-artistic documents, rather than imagined by a unified artistic voice. Playwrights "find"

their dramatic language in real world sources such as court transcripts, Congressional records, letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, recorded interviews, and so on. While theatre artists interested in historical reenactments or the scripted or impromptu performance of historical persons (à la Hal Holbrook's perennial Mark Twain) do indeed lay claim to the supposed merits of authenticity, their performances usually lack the impetus for political and social change which characterizes documentary drama. Smith writes in the tradition of those who draw the text of their plays from "found," real-life sources, and simultaneously expect that their use of authentic language will facilitate social change. A brief survey of this history sets the stage for my discussion of Smith's work.

Writing History to Change Society

The history of documentary drama in the twentieth century is in many ways the history of certain innovative theatre practitioners who believed in the power of theatre to effect progressive social change. Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) and Hallie Flanagan (1890-1969) were two such practitioners. Piscator, a German theatre artist whose work spanned much of the twentieth century, did much to develop the theoretical concepts and staging techniques of documentary drama. Flanagan, an American who had studied and admired Piscator's work, brought many of his documentary forms and practices to the American stage. Both of these influential stage directors rejected much about mainstream realist drama and its conventions in favor of more socially relevant and technically innovative kinds of dramas. The popular and critical responses to their plays foreshadow some of the difficulties that have plagued the contemporary reception of Smith's work.

Most often, these difficulties arise from the perceived political threat inherent in documentary dramas which challenge the social order to reconsider the experiences of various marginalized groups.

Piscator began producing plays that demonstrated the documentary impulse in Berlin in the 1920's, and from the start these plays were imbued with an overt political message. J.L. Styan sums up Piscator's political and artistic intent: "Piscator's intention was to imbue existing forms of drama, both naturalistic and expressionistic, with a new clarity, and so bring a pointedly social and moral purpose to the theatre."² He hoped his dramas would extend beyond the theatre, and tried to provide his audience with the information they would need to support and effect social change, often handing out "a programme as fat as a pamphlet, crammed with commentary on the chosen topic."³ He thus acknowledged an explicit political purpose for his theatre, hoping that by confronting the audience with documentary material he could directly induce social and political change.

For Piscator, the express intent of his early work is overtly communist. Trotz Alledem! (In Spite of Everything!), which Attilio Favorini calls "the Ur-text of the documentary theatre movement," was written under commission from the German Communist Party.⁴ The text of the 1925 play was composed entirely from documents chronicling the party's history. Piscator's strong communist politics led him to criticize

² J. L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Expressionism and Epic Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 130.

³ Styan, 129.

⁴ Attilio Favorini, "Representation and Reality: The Case of Documentary Theatre," Theatre Survey 35, no.2 (November 1994), 33.

the realist aesthetic he associated with capitalism: “In spite of Stanislavski, in spite of the development of realism and the creation of the fourth wall, the actor could never be truly natural on the stage . . . The epic play was to . . . report on some social or political theme, and, free from realism, it would open out its content for inspection.”⁵ Piscator’s communism contributed to his belief that presenting the proletariat audience of his theatre with the facts of capitalist oppression would hasten the end of the capitalist era. Trozt Alledem! is not only a history of the Communist party, but also a call to the people to take up communist beliefs and engage in communist activity. Piscator claims that the “essential point” of the work is: “The presentation of solid proof that our philosophy and all that can be deduced from it is the one and only valid approach for our time . . . And the way to do this is to show the link between events on stage and the great forces active in history.”⁶ This documentary drama is more than an artistic document; Piscator intends the play to have lasting real world consequences. Ironically, the German Communist party ultimately withdrew their support for the play, because Piscator’s exposure of the various contradictions in the party’s history and philosophy “did not have the immediate political value of Agitprop performances.”⁷ The Communist party newspaper criticized Trozt Alledem for its lack of appeal to popular sentiment, noting that overall the play was too documentary for popular taste.⁸ Whatever the Communists thought, Piscator’s work

⁵ Styan, 130-131.

⁶ Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Avon, 1978), 93.

⁷ C.D. Innes, Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 201.

⁸ John Willett, The Theatre of Erwin Piscator (New York: Homes & Meier, 1979), 54-55.

was incendiary and communist enough to offend the growing National Socialist party. Eventually, Piscator's political beliefs became a very real threat to his own safety. As prevailing social conditions in Germany deteriorated, Piscator fled the country.

Piscator, then, knows whereof he speaks when he claims, "The lesson to be learnt was that anybody who wants to lose his popular appeal has only to tell the populace the truth."⁹ His comment ironically foreshadows the political ambush that would prove the end of Hallie Flanagan's Federal Theatre Project. Established in 1935 as a part of the Works Projects Administration, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) at its height employed close to 12,000 Americans in all manner of theatrical endeavor. The wide variety of programs sponsored by the FTP speaks to its broad-based mission to employ and entertain as many Americans as possible: "Twelve thousand Federal Theatre employees put on more than fourteen hundred plays, entertaining more than twenty-five million Americans, many of whom saw live drama for the first time. These plays and programs spanned a wide spectrum, from dog acts to musicals to Shakespeare"¹⁰ Flanagan's dream was to establish regional theatres all across the United States, to encourage local participation in the development of theatre: "The master plan envisioned five great regional centers from which activity would radiate, with a new theatre building and a permanent company in each."¹¹ Unfortunately, this dream would not be realized, in part because of the political challenges posed by the documentary dramas she championed.

⁹ Piscator, The Political Theatre, vii.

¹⁰ Bernard Sternsher and Judith Sealander, eds., Women of Valor (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 152.

¹¹ Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 162.

The FTP was troubled almost from its very start. Not only were anti-New Deal politicians eager to associate the project with wasteful government spending, even those in favor of it disagreed on the project's primary purpose. Flanagan felt that artistic innovation and excellence should be the project's motivating factor: "Most WPA officials had no sympathy with this purpose. The arts Projects, they believed, had been set up solely to provide jobs."¹² Flanagan openly acknowledges that her decision to begin producing Living Newspapers was based as much on the logistical needs of the FTP as any progressive politic she sought to promote. Joanne Bentley, Flanagan's stepdaughter and author of the 1988 biography Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre, explains that in the beginning, the FTP was faced with many more jobless individuals than they could afford to employ. Flanagan had been experimenting with the documentary drama in her previous job as a university professor and suggested the Living Newspaper to Elmer Rice, the director of the New York branch: "Reminding him of the documentary dramas she had produced at Vassar, she pointed out that the sets in every case had been simple and easy to build; props and costumes had been minimal; the shows had cost next to nothing to produce, and many actors had been put to work."¹³ The FTP would always evince a certain tension between its artistic and social relief goals. Flanagan saw the Living Newspaper as an obvious solution to some of these problems.

Most Living Newspapers dramatized the "story" of a symbolic, often fictional individual in the context of some larger social concern. While mixing the factual with the fictional, the creators of the Living Newspaper took great care to indicate to the audience

¹² Joanne Bentley, Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 202.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

which sections were imaginative and which were authentic fact.¹⁴ The plays addressed a broad-based audience and often exhibited a pronounced leftist political slant. A review of the topics selected for Living Newspapers during the FTP give some indication of the progressive politic inherent in the form: “Living newspapers were written on such varied topics as housing, health care, cooperatives, natural resources, labor unions, Negroes, the movies, and public utilities. Each play was thoroughly documented, but they did have an editorial slant: personal problems were caused by social conditions.”¹⁵ Living newspaper scripts such as Triple A Plowed Under (1936), Power (1937), and One-Third of a Nation (1938) combined the factual and the fictional in an attempt to show how large social concerns affected the average citizen.

The documentary portion of the typical Living Newspaper was comprised of text originally found in such sources as the newspaper, radio addresses, and the Congressional Record. In order to compile and edit the massive amount of authentic text which each Living Newspaper required, Flanagan and Rice set up a collaborative team of researchers and writers modeled on that great source of information in the early twentieth century: the newspaper. Flanagan describes this process:

The staff of the Living Newspaper was set up like a large city daily, with editor-in-chief, managing editor, city editor, reporters and copy-readers . . . in order to evolve an authoritative dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary, of current problems. With Arthur Arent as editor and later as

¹⁴ See William Scott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 107 for examples of the methods the FTP used to indicate this information.

¹⁵ John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, Free, Adult and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project (Washington: New Republic Books, 1978), 11.

playwright, the Living Newspaper from the first was not concerned with surface news, scandal, human interest stories, but rather with the conditions back of conditions.¹⁶

Obviously, Flanagan and her colleagues took the Living Newspaper's responsibility to disseminate factual information very seriously. Flanagan had great faith in the newspaper as the model for the most efficacious transmission of socially relevant information.

The Living Newspaper manifests many similarities to Piscator's work, which is not surprising, considering that Flanagan had traveled in Germany and Russia as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1926 and had been exposed to Piscator's techniques.¹⁷ The reliance on found text, specifically facts which could explicate certain realities about contemporary socio-political situations, informed an aesthetic in which any unified authorial voice is subordinated to the unimpeded transmission of real world information.¹⁸ In particular, each Living Newspaper was narrated by an offstage character known only as the "Voice of the Living Newspaper" that provided factual, contextual information for each scene as the play progressed. For example, in Triple A Plowed Under, the Voice of the Living Newspaper informs the audience: "In the troubled fifteen years, 1920-1935, farm incomes fall five and one-half billion dollars; unemployment rises seven million, five-hundred and seventy-eight thousand."¹⁹ While the "Voice

¹⁶ Hallie Flanagan, "Federal Theatre," in American Anxieties: A Collective Portrait ed. Louis Fuller (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 141.

¹⁷ Favorini, "Representation and Reality," 35. Flanagan's admiration for Piscator and his staging methods would eventually be used as ammunition against her during the Congressional investigation of FTP.

¹⁸ O'Connor and Brown, 10.

¹⁹ Several scenes from Triple A Plowed Under are published in Fuller's American Anxieties.

of the Living Newspaper” purportedly made factual announcements about the conditions surrounding social issues, the statistics and headlines were chosen for their provocative political potential. The facts provided the backdrop for fictional scenes that emphasized the effect of prevailing social conditions on the individual, and the individual family. The fictional scenes were very effective in evoking the sympathy of the audience, and the documentary material was used to convince the audience that the difficult circumstances of the characters were caused by complicated social paradigms rather than individual choices or failings.

The FTP decision to begin producing Living Newspapers did little to ease the political tensions over the project. The first Living Newspaper that the FTP attempted to bring to the stage was Ethiopia (1936). The play documented Mussolini’s imperialist invasion of Africa and warned against the dangers of the spread of fascism. The subject of the play troubled those conservative politicians who supported a “hands-off” foreign affairs policy, but more importantly, the form of the drama, which included actors representing various political figures including FDR and Mussolini, drew criticism from within the Roosevelt administration. Ultimately, concerned about the presentation of real individuals who would declaim passages they had previously committed to the historical record, the Arts Program issued a directive prohibiting the “representation of the head of a foreign state.”²⁰ To the fury of Rice and other theatre professionals involved, the White House intervened to prevent Ethiopia from opening on Broadway. Rice resigned in protest, leaving Flanagan struggling again to get the FTP on its feet.

Eventually, the FTP did manage to open Triple A Plowed Under in the fall of

²⁰ Bentley, 213.

1936, and it was a smash hit, playing to full houses for many weeks. The play was not only a commercial success, but received much critical praise as well. Flanagan was most satisfied with the broad social base of the audience and the percentage of viewers who were not typical Broadway attendees. She remarked, "We want an audience which revolves in large orbit. We prefer the four million to the four hundred with their jewels, furs, and town cars."²¹ Flanagan's populist sentiment and rejection of the traditional bourgeois audience for the Broadway theatre indicate some of those tendencies which would eventually cause the FTP and its administrators to be brought before the House Committee on UnAmerican Activity (HUAC). HUAC was established in the Spring of 1938 by several vehemently anti-Roosevelt politicians, lead by Congressman Martin Dies. It did not take them long to turn their attention to the FTP. By August of that year the Committee was actively investigating the project, charging that the FTP was a hot bed of communist activity and that Flanagan herself was actively encouraging Communist revolt.

Flanagan, for her part, took the matter very seriously, but maintained at first a good deal of faith that her carefully worded responses, statements and testimony would ultimately undermine HUAC charges.²² For several weeks, however, the Committee refused to call Flanagan as a witness, relying instead on the testimony of a few dissatisfied former FTP employees. Flanagan grew increasingly frustrated not only with the Committee's reliance upon these imperfect sources of information, but on the tendency of the press to disseminate any scandalous-sounding item, regardless of its

²¹ Ibid., 220.

²² See Bentley, 306-310.

veracity. She describes her own bewilderment at the situation: “As days went on and the paper gave more and more space to the testimony of a few unqualified witnesses, it seemed to me increasingly incredible that the congressional committee called no officials of the project and no theatre experts from outside the project.”²³ Flanagan can not comprehend the Committee’s desire to wallow in factually incorrect and unsubstantiated information. Bentley explains the painful effect this produced: “Untruths, half-truths, and downright lies were allowed to stand. The impression left with the public was that Hallie was using Federal Theatre to promote a Communist takeover of the United States government and that the Committee was performing a service in making this known.”²⁴ Ironically, the press, which the Living Newspapers had made use of and sought to emulate, turned out, in the end, to be dangerously unreliable sources of information about the real world. The HUAC investigation eventually lead to Congressional hearings. Karen Malpede Taylor colorfully summarizes the subsequent events: “A handful of old white men, on the basis of hearsay and prejudice, effectively stopped . . . the growth of a national theatre, which was bringing employment to thousands, and plays, circuses and vaudeville to hundreds of thousands of people.”²⁵ The documentary dramas, and the populist impulse they displayed, provided HUAC with more ammunition against the project than they needed. The Federal Theatre Project was ended by an act of Congress in June 1939.

²³ Hallie Flanagan, “Did I Consider Theatre a Weapon,” in Sternsher and Sealander, Women of Valor, 154.

²⁴ Bentley, 307.

²⁵ Karen Malpede Taylor, People’s Theatre in Amerika (New York: Drama Books, 1972), 159.

The conflict between Flanagan and HUAC is particularly interesting to this study because it provides both a compelling echo of the NEA controversy and an ironic foreshadowing of the Smith-Pulitzer debate. The most obvious connection to the NEA debate is that both focus on questions over the nature and desirability of government arts funding. Both controversies were dominated by conservative public figures who sought to vilify particular artists for their own political ends. In both cases, the attackers demonstrated little specific and/or accurate knowledge about the art and rejected any notion that art always already manifests some political ideology and is therefore subject to socio-political critique. Indeed, the whole notion of criticism itself is devalued as a means of reading the meanings of the art in question. This is facilitated by the art's dependence upon real material, and the attendant assumption that meaning is transparent and freely communicated directly to the audience.

The relationship between the demise of Flanagan's FTP and the controversy over Twilight is just as compelling, especially in light of each artist's strategy in defense of their projects. While Smith and her supporters work diligently to affirm her authorship of the dramas in question, Flanagan attempted repeatedly to deny that she or the FTP really counted as "the author" of the Living Newspapers that had caused the HUAC such concern. In her testimony, and in subsequent written accounts of the proceedings, Flanagan repeatedly asserts that the dialogue of the Living Newspapers was found text, which had been originally uttered by the historical individuals represented on stage. She bristles at the notion that the FTP should receive credit or condemnation for the content of the plays, which she claims is wholly factual: "In the three years of the existence of the Living Newspaper, not one allegation has been made that the news presented was

untrue. Nobody has ever proved that we misquoted.”²⁶ Flanagan assumes that if the material presented is factually accurate, the stage presentation of it is ipso facto above reproach. She attempts to figure documentary drama as the disinterested transmitter of factual information, and thus renders the particular authorship of the plays irrelevant. This is precisely the strategy the Pulitzer committee would employ to justify their declaration that *Twilight* was not, actually, a play. It begins to unravel the reasons Smith’s work is unable to fully satisfy the traditional genre expectations of either documentary or non-documentary drama. A full exploration of these ideas must begin with a brief description of Smith’s methodology, playtexts, and performance strategies.

Anna Deavere Smith and Documentary Form

Smith has been using verbatim text from recorded interviews to create performances for many years. She began her training in theatre performance in the early 1970’s in San Francisco. Initially trained as a performer, she compellingly describes her primary interest in acting as those moments which provide a glimpse of the authentic: “When I first went to California to study performance and look for whatever carcasses were left of the ‘revolution,’ I thought I was actually in search of the authentic. It came as no surprise to me that the study of acting in the 1970’s was about getting ‘real’”²⁷ Her assessment of acting has much to do with her socio-political commitments. Tellingly, Smith figures progressive political politics as a quest for the authentic, and eventually

²⁶Quoted in Bentley, 319. Flanagan made this remark in her testimony to the HUAC.

²⁷ Anna Deavere Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House, 2000), 8.

figures acting as an excellent means of examining reality and achieving personal authenticity:

Acting is the furthest thing from lying that I have encountered. It is the furthest thing from make-believe. It is the furthest thing from pretending. It is the most unfake thing there is. Acting is the search for the authentic. It is the search for the authentic by using the fictional as a frame . . . Because, yes indeed, real life inhabits the authentic.²⁸

Smith's exaltation of acting and its potential to present authentic reality seems ironic in light of the theatre's time-honored dependence on imitation. From the outset of her career, Smith indicates that she sees performance as a means of experiencing the authentic as well as achieving socio-political ends.

Eventually Smith became quite disillusioned with traditional acting training. Her work in documentary forms arose directly from her frustration with the method-based acting classes common in most traditional U.S. theatre programs. She became uneasy with an acting style based on the psyche of the actor, not the character: "At first, my mission was to deconstruct psychological realism. American acting techniques are very self-oriented. These assumptions that you can find a character in yourself . . . it's a spiritual dead end."²⁹ Smith felt increasingly alienated from an acting style that focused on the actor's personal psychological development at the expense of any effort to truly understand or empathize with "the other." Her discomfort foreshadows her later performance practice which would focus on the lives and experiences of a broad array of

²⁸ Smith, Talk to Me, 11.

²⁹ Richard Stayton, "A Fire in a Crowded Theatre," American Theatre, July/August 1993, 73.

real life individuals, many of whom are drawn from traditionally marginalized communities.

Eventually, she abandoned traditional methods of teaching acting completely and developed a method based on a precise recreation of real-life individuals. At first, she recorded television talk shows and then practiced re-enacting the dialogue exchanges. She then started approaching people on the street to ask if they would grant her an interview, inviting those who accepted to come and see themselves performed on stage. At first, Smith used this method to create acting exercises for her students, but it ultimately proved so successful that she began to compile material for an on-going performance series entitled “On the Road: The Search for American Character.” Smith characterizes her interest in the speech of all manner of ordinary citizens as the key to a fuller understanding of American identity:

If I were going to go around and listen listen listen to Americans. would I end up with some kind of composite that would tell me more about America than what is evidently there? How could I get underneath the surfaces? I could tell that speech would have to be a resource. Look at the way people can dive and dip and breathe and exclaim and come up with all manner of sounds in the course of saying a word.³⁰

Smith’s fascination with found text is driven by her strong belief that authentic speech can reveal the intricacies of human personality and her commitment to establishing a kind of national dialogue about the nature of American character.

Smith’s propensity to base her dramas on the transcribed text of recorded

³⁰ Smith, Talk to Me, 50.

interviews points to documentary drama's traditional adoption of technology and multi-media sources. Smith fully embraces this technological aspect of her process, and celebrates it as a triumph over traditional acting training: "And we're in a moment when technology can support what I'm doing. Stanislavski did not have a tape recorder. I do."³¹ This aspect of her process informs her work as playwright, as well; her published texts are designed to encourage the reader to receive the text as an exact documentation of real human speech, complete with stutters, stammers, place holders, and the like. One section of Twilight reproduces the speech of Cornel West and provides an excellent example of Smith's emphasis on the minute details of human speech:

That we (*hard to hear that "we"*) gain some moral and plitical [sic]
regeneration
and expansion by means of conquest and dispossession of duh
people's land.
So I mean a, uh,
Richard Slotkin talks about dis in terms
of being a gunfighterr (*grabbing the "r"*) nation.³²

The plays document speech so as to provide the reader with glimpses of Smith's real life sources as she experienced them in their interviews.

By compiling the edited interviews in a single performance text, Smith transforms her acting exercise into a playwrighting technique. Her process rejects an overt, coherent authorial voice. Instead, she celebrates those moments where the juxtaposition of diverse

³¹ Smith, Talk to Me, 53.

³² Smith, Twilight, 41-42.

voices and viewpoints creates what she sees as a productive friction in the narrative of American character: "Finding American character is a process of looking at fragments, of looking at the unmerged. One has to do the footwork, one has to move from place to place, one has to stand outside. It's not easy, and the danger is that, when you stand outside, you could end up undocumented."³³ Smith uses the word "undocumented" to describe the perilous feeling of resisting a comprehensive master narrative. Using the term "undocumented" as a metaphor for "danger" speaks again to the documentary dramatist's notion that safety and security lie in the unfettered presentation of historical fact. In Smith's case, it also evokes images of the "undocumented" alien, that usually racialized "other" who so often complicates any holistic or simplistic notion of American character or "The" American story.

Smith manifests a strong impulse to play on the sentiment of the (hopefully) multi-cultural audience. She claims that in her writing process, "What most influences my decisions about what to include is how an interview text works as a physical, audible, performable vehicle. Words are not an end to themselves. They are a means to evoking the character of the person who spoke them. Every person that I include . . . has a presence that is much more important than the information they give."³⁴ Tellingly, Smith's emphasis is not on the factual authenticity of the material or its ability to communicate didactic information. Instead, she would speak to the hearts and souls of her audience, and evoke the authentic "presence" of the diverse individuals she has interviewed.

³³ Smith, Talk to Me, 23.

³⁴ Smith, Twilight, xxiii-xxiv.

Documentaries, especially those which seek social change, have a long relationship with sentiment and feeling. In Documentary Expression and Thirties America (1973), William Scott points out that early documentarians realized that the social changes they sought were more likely if their work appealed not only to the viewer's logic, but their sense of humanity as well. Scott echoes Smith's concerns about the power of sentiment: "Those who practice documentary tend to be skeptical of the intellect and the abstractions through which it works. Like artists, they believe that a fact, to be true and important, must be felt."³⁵ Smith, who often resists being called an academic (although she teaches theatre at Stanford), consciously attempts to enhance the literal information presented by evoking the opinionated presence of the real live people she presents.

Smith claims that most contemporary theatre "does not reflect or mirror society. It has been stingy and selfish and it has to do better."³⁶ In the introduction to Twilight she chides the very type of theatre whose officials were simultaneously deciding that her theatre piece was not fully a play: "Clearly even white main-stream theater could be more interesting, and more honest, if people of color were integrated into the drama rather than used as walk-on stereotypes."³⁷ She describes her work as an attempt to be a part of a "larger, healthier, more interesting" theatre, which more fully represents America. She explicitly embraces and troubles these complicated issues. Unlike so much mainstream theatre, which either ignores race completely or struggles to reconcile difficult racial

³⁵ Scott, 12.

³⁶ Steven Proffitt, "Anna Deavere Smith: Finding a Voice for the Cacaphony that is Los Angeles," Los Angeles Times, 11 July 1995, M3.

³⁷ Smith, Twilight, xxi.

questions with pat universalist assumptions, Smith's plays and performances address the issues head on. Ironically, language has failed the mainstream media in their responses to the show, and they have relied on re-writing the theatrical work as "something else." The implications of this phenomenon for the realm of theatre and theatre criticism both excite and indict our practice and our history.

The Plays

This documentary playwrighting/performance methodology has in many ways proven tremendously successful for Smith. In 1991, the Public Theater commissioned her to write a drama exploring issues of identity in New York City. Smith decided to examine the recent events in Crown Heights as the basis for what became Fires in the Mirror. Most of the dramatized events had taken place in Crown Heights in the summer of 1991, when conflict between African and Caribbean Americans and Lubavich Jews in Crown Heights erupted in a series of violent incidents. The controversy started when a driver in the motorcade accompanying the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe lost control of his car and crashed onto a crowded sidewalk, killing a seven-year old African American boy and injuring his young cousin. When stories of the accident and the perceived Lubavitcher indifference to the incident spread, many African and Caribbean Americans in the community began to demonstrate angrily against both the police and the other Jewish residents of the neighborhood. Several hours later, a Jewish scholar was set upon and stabbed to death by a group of young Black men. Several weeks of marches, protests, demonstrations, and various other civil disturbances, generated by both communities, followed. When Smith set out to chronicle the events in Crown Heights in the fall and

winter of 1991, she took on an extremely complicated racial situation with all its attendant confusion, anger, and resentment.

The result, as staged at the Public in the Spring of 1992, is a one-woman show in which Smith portrays everyone from Al Sharpton to anonymous street “youths” to Lubavitcher housewives. She swiftly changes from one character to another, using only the most minimal props and costume changes. Her play uses two basic strategies. When describing the incidents in Crown Heights, she juxtaposes contradictory accounts from various eyewitnesses and family members to emphasize the complicated and constructed nature of each individual’s take on the events in questions. One British newspaper claims, “In Fires in the Mirror the testimonies of blacks and Jews are laid side by side . . . Each community, sympathetically observed, views the other as through the wrong end of the telescope. There is bigotry, but there are no villains.”³⁸ Then, to explore the underlying racial issues of the conflict, she presents a wide variety of “everyday” people who (often unintentionally) raise questions about racial identity and cultural stereotypes. Smith draws common themes and concerns from the documentary text of these “person on the street” interviews, providing evidence that the widely diverse subjects she interviewed actually have more in common than they might think. These common interests run from the mundane (hairstyles) to the momentous (fear of racial violence) in text which always emphasizes the idiosyncratic personalities of the people she interviewed.

One such recurring theme in Fires is the incapacity of language to reflect the truth

³⁸ Michael Church, “Voices from Feel-Bad Brooklyn,” London Observer, 21 March 1993, 57.

about complex social issues. In one scene, Smith portrays a New York City official who describes the difficulty of documenting various kinds of racially charged incidents because of the lack of precision in our language about race:

We probably have seventy different kinds of bias, prejudice, racism, and discrimination but it's not in our mind-set to be clear about it, so I think that we have sort of lousy language on the subject and that is a reflection of our unwillingness to deal with it honestly and to sort it out.³⁹

This skepticism about language may seem ironic for a documentary dramatist, especially one who has repeatedly expressed her sincere belief in the possibility of an “authentic language.”⁴⁰ However, the text must be understood in light of Smith’s previously noted assertion that the “truth” of American character lies in the contradictions and gaps of language. Her attempt to address the manifold social pressures of race relations in contemporary American society fully acknowledges the folly of relying on any single authentic account.

Ironically, Fires opened in April 1992, the same week that Los Angeles erupted in

³⁹ Smith, Fires in the Mirror, 66.

⁴⁰ See Smith, Talk to Me.

violence after the acquittal of the police officers accused of assaulting Rodney King.⁴¹

The civil unrest in LA lasted for several days, leaving fifty-eight people dead and more than two thousand injured. The crisis resulted in approximately twelve thousands arrests with at least three thousand businesses damaged by looting and widespread fires.⁴²

Shortly thereafter, Smith was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum to create a theatre piece in response to Los Angeles's own racial problems. Smith continued in and expanded upon the form she had been developing over the years. Her commission provided her the opportunity to interview hundreds of Los Angelenos who had been directly or indirectly involved in the riots. In selecting characters for the show, Smith makes an effort to be as inclusive as possible. The text of Twilight includes interviews with individuals from widely diverse socio-economic realms, political standpoints, and racial and ethnic identities. Smith successively performs dozens of characters who provide their accounts of, explanations for, and responses to the events.

The play presents a moving portrait of Los Angeles as a somewhat shell-shocked community rent by confusion, anger, apprehension and an acute awareness of the widening gap between various social groups. By telling the stories of the crisis in the words of many differently-positioned individuals, it succeeds in bringing the widely publicized events into sharp personal focus. Smith uses the interview text to document the experiences and opinions of public figures like Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley and Congresswoman Maxine Waters, as well as completely unknown citizens. She is perhaps most effective as she chooses significant details from the interviews to explore the

⁴¹ Smith, Talk to Me, 96.

⁴² Smith, Twilight, 261.

consequences of the events for those Los Angelenos who were inadvertently caught up in the violent racial crisis. One of the most moving monologues, for example, is that of Elvira Evers, an innocent bystander who was shot by a random bullet during the disturbances. The bullet entered Evers's body and came to rest in the arm of her unborn daughter. Smith includes the story of Evers's injury and recovery, but also emphasizes Evers's more quotidian desire to have her infant daughter's ears pierced as El Salvador tradition dictates.⁴³ In his review of the play, Richard Yarborough notes that Twilight repeatedly forces the viewer to acknowledge the "brutal, undeniable, fundamental fact" that racism denies the humanity of marginalized individuals. He goes on to assert that "Twilight confronts us at every turn with that humanity."⁴⁴

In Twilight, Smith was more concerned than ever that her play address the vital questions of racial identity in all of their complex intensity. In the introduction to the published version, she claims:

My predominant concern about Twilight was that my own history, which is a history of race as a black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be. For this reason, I sought out dramaturges who had very developed careers and identities, outside the theatre profession. I was interested not only in their ethnic diversity, but in the diversity that they would bring to the project in terms of areas of expertise.⁴⁵

Smith relied on her multicultural dramaturgical team to reinforce her commitment to the

⁴³ Smith, Twilight, 122.

⁴⁴ Richard Yarborough, "A Remarkably Powerful, Emotional Experience," Los Angeles Times, 5 July 1993, F3.

⁴⁵ Smith, Twilight, xii.

complexity of race relations in America.⁴⁶ She significantly points to the team's extra-theatrical experience as part of their vital influence, asserting the team was valuable because they brought "real-world experience" to the creative process. Here Smith seems to unwittingly reactivate the art/life binary which documentary drama in many ways tries to deconstruct. She assumes that the dramaturges, who come not from the theatre but the "real world," can protect the "real life" interview material from artistic manipulation.

Twilight is an expansive and often self-contradictory document, in which various racial and social groups make their case, blame each other, and implicate themselves in the deadly racial tension and its consequences. Smith represents, in the words of one reviewer, "an array of voices, ranging from victims of violence to shopkeepers, looters, gang members, cops, jurors, and such public figures as former police chief Daryl Gates and truck driver Reginald Denny."⁴⁷ She presents characters who are white, African-American, Latino, Korean, rich, poor, urban, suburban, deadly serious and highly comical. Throughout the play, the audience is repeatedly confronted with contradictory documentary material, which accentuates the complexity of race relations in America. The difficult questions that she asks about the racial character of American identity are substantiated by the documentary material she employs.

The Press and The Problems

The critical response to Smith's work has largely been celebratory. Writers from

⁴⁶ Smith's dramaturgical team for the Los Angeles production included Dorrine Kondo, Hector Tobar, Elizabeth Alexander, and Oskar Eustis.

⁴⁷ Bob Blanchard, "Drama of L.A.'s Anguished Soul," The Progressive, December 1993, 35.

both the academic and popular press praised the performances for their beauty, their ingenuity, and especially their ability to objectively present the complicated and racially charged histories of the events in question. Frank Rich claims that Fires is: “Quite simply the most compelling and sophisticated view of urban racial and class conflict that one could hope to encounter . . . What makes Fires in the Mirror so moving and provocative, so remarkably free of cant and polemic, is its creator’s ability to find the unexpected and unguarded and her objective grasp of the big picture.”⁴⁸ Rich’s comments exemplify the media’s admiration of the text and emphasis on Smith’s ability to forego personal bias.

In the Village Voice, Michael Feingold ascribes the lack of obvious polemic in Fires to Smith’s personality: “One’s tempted to read a judgment on the artist’s part into the choice of phrases, the body language, the inflections. Her innate good taste and discretion . . . fends the temptation off.”⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, Feingold figures Smith’s “good taste” as the defense against any overt “judgment” in the play; his comment assumes that the understood goal of documentary drama is a play which foregoes “judgment.” Celebrating the objectivity of the plays has been a consistent and ultimately troubling refrain in the praise of Smith’s work. Smith herself has claimed on occasion that the plays lack any residue of her own personal experience or opinion, privileging the documentary text’s potential for making meaning: “I’m not Afrocentric in a typical way . . . My voice is in the juxtaposition of other voices.”⁵⁰ In some ways, her express goal is to efface her own presence as she attempts to evoke the essential character of the

⁴⁸ Frank Rich, “Diversity of America in One-Person Shows,” New York Times, 15 May 1992, C1+.

⁴⁹ Michael Feingold, “Opposing Selves,” Village Voice, 19 May 1992, 103.

⁵⁰ Jack Kroll, “A Woman for All Seasons,” Newsweek, 1 June 1992, 74.

interviewee. The persistent reference to the objective, unbiased nature of the texts of the plays points to the subsequent difficulty the plays encountered when they ran up against the traditional expectations of dramatic art.

For one thing, the media reviews which emphasized Smith's objectivity encouraged the characterization of her work as journalism, not theatre. An excellent example of this phenomenon is a feature article by Linda Winer that ran in the Los Angeles Times to coincide with the New York opening of Twilight.⁵¹ The article begins with a full-page picture of Smith, photographed against a chain-link fence in a stark urban background. Smith is conspicuously not in a theatre space; rather she glares sternly into the camera, wearing a tape recorder over one shoulder and clutching a microphone tightly in her fist. Two-inch capital letters emblazon the words "ROAD WARRIOR" across the bottom of the image, this being apparently the title of the image, the article, and Smith herself. The subtitle of the article, "Travels with Anna Deavere Smith in Post-Riot Los Angeles," points the reader's attention to the interview portion of Smith's creative process, instead of focusing on her performances. The article gives a very journalistic-sounding account of the process by which Smith acquires text: "It's hot early. Smith is heading for the first of the day's six interviews. . . Her hair, which she keeps slicked back on-stage in an androgynous braid, is an explosion of dark and golden tendrils, still damp from the shower after her daily dawn at the gym."⁵² Winer even bothers to point out that Smith's journalistic hair is different from her theatrical hair. The description Winer provides is pointedly not of Smith the theatre artist, but of Smith the interviewer, the

⁵¹ Linda Winer, "Road Warrior: Travels with Anna Deavere Smith in Post-Riot Los Angeles," Los Angeles Times, 6 March 1994, Section Calendar, p. 27+.

⁵² *Ibid.*

journalist who can objectively gather the real words of real people.

Once the plays have been re-written as journalism, the criticism manifests a pronounced tendency to evaluate Smith's project solely in relation to its use or lack of journalistic objectivity. Although theatre works have not traditionally been held to such journalistic standards, Smith's play and her performance are constantly being evaluated in these terms. One recurring method critics use to achieve such a judgment is tracking down and re-interviewing the individuals Smith portrays in the show. Such articles attempt to check the relative objectivity of Smith's work by asking interviewees to evaluate their stage representations. For her 1993 LA Times feature on Twilight, Diane Haithman locates several of the individuals Smith had presented on stage, and reports their reaction to the piece.⁵³ Haithman questions individuals such as Reginald Denny and an ex-juror known only as "Maria" to provide evidence that most of the interviewees thought that Smith had impartially re-created their text on the stage. Haithman also relates that the other jurors, angered by Maria's telling description of jury deliberations, "un-invited" her to a "jurors reunion" scheduled for that summer. The effort to assert that Smith's theatre piece has real-life consequences sustains its claims of authenticity, and evokes the standard of objectivity against which the play is continually judged.

Questions regarding Smith's objectivity are inextricably caught up with questions of race. This dynamic is not lost on Smith, who speaks about it compellingly: "People ask about objectivity because they are assuming that all art takes a side, particularly 'political' drama, particularly race – and particularly because I am an African-American

⁵³ Diane Haithman, "Twilight: The Voices from Offstage," Los Angeles Times, 15 July 1993, F1+.

woman. When I seem to include more than they would have expected, they call it objective."⁵⁴ Smith suspects the wonder with which so many critics responded to the so-called objectivity of her plays, figuring it as a response to her racial identity as much as her practice. Her work is called objective because it can not be relegated to the monolithic politic they would impose on the identity position "African-American woman." One stunned critic remarked: "Not only was she an African-American woman, she was talking about racial issues freed from the blinders of identity politics. Not only was she a serious experiment in the theatre, but she was, of all things, entertaining."⁵⁵ Because she exceeds the boundaries of her identity category, her work is designated "objective," which once again reinforces its perception as journalism.

In her book Old Wives Tales, white feminist critic Tania Modleski admits to falling victim to the impulse to hold the play accountable to journalistic standards. She relates, "After seeing the way white women were portrayed (in Twilight), my first reaction was one of anger . . . I even briefly considered not publishing this chapter: if Smith was not prepared to acknowledge my oppression as a woman, I felt, I would not recognize hers as an African American."⁵⁶ Fortunately, though, Modleski reconsiders, and ultimately offers an eloquent reading of precisely the phenomenon under discussion here:

And so, a work which started out scrupulously to reproduce the specifics of

⁵⁴ Kathy Henderson, "Humanity Behind the Headlines," Playbill, April 1994, 55.

⁵⁵ Carol Lloyd, "Voice of America," in salon.com's "Brilliant Careers No. 0005," salonmag.com/bc/1998/12/cov_08bc, accessed 3 December 2000.

⁵⁶ Tania Modleski, Old Wives' Tales and Other Women's Stories (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 121.

peoples' opinions, utterances, and mannerisms and to locate itself in the time and place of the struggle it documents ends by being acclaimed in terms that evacuate all politics . . . Doubtless this move is facilitated by the fact that the work in question is a one-person show and specifically a one-woman show – and even more specifically, a one-woman show by an African American.⁵⁷

Smith's authorship is called into question because of the ease with which our society continues to silence the voice of the racial "other" and erase their contributions to American culture. The popular press response to Smith's work, which seems to celebrate this African American playwright, ultimately provides the means by which the traditional critical community effectively negated her artistic accomplishment. They remain preoccupied with the transparent access to real life afforded by Smith's use of found text, thus negating her active role as playwright.

Writers who reject Smith as playwright spend a great deal of time trying to determine how to categorize her work as "something else," refiguring Smith as an actor, a performance artist, a shaman, a journalist, a sociologist, or something else entirely. Vincent Canby spends much of his New York Times rave review of Twilight describing how much the theatre piece is like a film.⁵⁸ Many critics describe the event as more spiritual than theatrical, calling the performance "a séance" and claiming in regard to Smith's performance: "Women were once burned at the stake for such powers of possession."⁵⁹ John Leonard claims that Fires "is the sort of glorious hybrid that leaves

⁵⁷ Ibid, 104.

⁵⁸ Vincent Canby, "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992," New York Times, 3 April 1994, C1+.

⁵⁹ See Greg Tate, "Bewitching the Other," Village Voice, 21 July 1992, 98.

you spluttering for analogues” and describes Smith’s performance: “Like talk radio, she fulminates; like docudrama, she pontificates; like history, she hallucinates.”⁶⁰

Playwright Robert Schenkan, whose play The Kentucky Cycle shared a performance season with Twilight and was nominated against it for the Tony, went on record to say: “From a dramaturgical point of view, it’s not a work of the imagination. This is not to take anything away from her performance, which is amazing. I think of it as performance art, not as a play.”⁶¹ Sean Mitchell, in his article “The Tangle over Twilight,” describes the general critical consternation over the plays. He recounts how an older, “established” playwright had confided in him, “It’s an eloquent performance all right, but there’s a lot of concern among Tony voters that it’s not a play.”⁶² Mitchell goes on to sum up the critical confusion:

The effect Smith achieved on-stage was impressive, but what was she doing exactly? It was not a play like Our Town or Death of a Salesman, nor was it a personal monologue of the kinds popularized by such writer-actors as Spalding Gray and Eric Bogosian . . . It was nonfiction, but interpretive nonfiction, a theatrical relation perhaps to the literary forms. . . (which) combined reporting with novelistic narratives.⁶³

Although Smith, when asked to characterize her work, has repeatedly asserted that she writes plays, her own Playbill describes Twilight as “a unique blend of journalism, oral

⁶⁰ John Leonard, “The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in Brooklyn,” New York Magazine, 3 May 1993, 68.

⁶¹ Sean Mitchell, “The Tangle Over Twilight,” Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1994, sec. Calendar, p. 41. Schenkan’s play eventually won the Tony.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, sec. Calendar, p. 7.

history, and acting.”⁶⁴ Nearly every critical account of the show investigates the relationship between Smith’s drama and documentary journalism, a relationship based solely on the show’s authentic text.⁶⁵ The critical community seems unable to accommodate the co-existence of the “real” and the “theatrical” within the same performance. Smith’s use of found text facilitates the creation of an unnecessarily strict opposition between these two categories.

The Pulitzer jury relied heavily on this opposition in their rejection of Twilight. Ultimately, they gave two reasons for removing Smith's play from consideration: "The language of the play is not invented but gleaned from interviews . . . and the play is not reproducible by other performers because it relies for authenticity on the performer's having done those interviews."⁶⁶ According to the Pulitzer jury, the authentic text takes precedence over Smith's work in collecting the interviews, asking the questions, editing the responses, selecting which characters to portray, and creating the dramatic work. The authenticity prevails because the committee, unable to account for the diversity of voices present in a piece by an African-American woman, can only understand and discuss the piece as journalistic text. William A. Henry 3rd, chairman of the Pulitzer jury, described Smith’s process and her product by saying, “Plainly, it was a creative act. But it's not fiction.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Henderson, 55.

⁶⁵ See Steven Proffitt, “Anna Deavere Smith: Finding a Voice for the Cacophony that is Los Angeles,” Los Angeles Times, 11 July 1995, M3; and Anna Deavere Smith, Fires in the Mirror, xxxiv.

⁶⁶ Bruce Weber, “On Stage and Off: Rebutting Pulitzer Prize Perceptions.” New York Times, April 22 1994, C2(L).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

His explanation doesn't precisely account for their rejection of the drama, however, especially in light of the long history of the relationship between artistic forms, including theatre, and documentary text. Mitchell points out that in 1979, Norman Mailer's book The Executioner's Song won the Pulitzer prize for fiction, in spite of the fact that it was based on many tape-recorded interviews.⁶⁸ Similarly, the Pulitzer for drama was awarded in 1938 to the play Abe Lincoln in Illinois, which is based largely on the verbatim writings of Lincoln himself. More to the point and more recently, in 1975 the jury selected A Chorus Line, a show based largely on interviews with Broadway dancers, as the recipient of the award.⁶⁹

Smith herself is described as "aggrieved" in response to Pulitzer jury's stated reasons for withdrawing her play from consideration.⁷⁰ She rejects both excuses, maintaining "I never, ever said other people couldn't do my work . . . I want other people to do the acting, to experience being in somebody else's shoes." Smith also recognizes that the rejection stems at least partially from the jury's inability to recognize her work in a show which seems to lack an overt authorial voice: "I deliberately positioned myself across from that kind of theater, that has a single voice."⁷¹ Unable to account for multiple, fully "authentic" yet fully diverse voices generated from one theatrical source,

⁶⁸ Mitchell, 7.

⁶⁹ A Chorus Line, as a Broadway musical, is obviously of a quite different genre than most contemporary documentary drama. However, any questions about the documentary sources of the material are put to rest by Robert Viaga et al. in On the Line (New York: William Morrow, 1990). This book is by several of the dancers involved with the original workshop of A Chorus Line and goes to great lengths to document the extent to which the text of the show was drawn, verbatim, from recorded interviews.

⁷⁰ Weber, C2(L).

⁷¹ Ibid.

the committee erases Smith from the creative process entirely. They confine the characters Smith would present as the subject of drama to authentic bits of text. This relegates these individuals, most of whom represent marginalized voices not frequently embraced by the American popular theatre, to the more familiar realm of the journalistic sound bite. Sadly, this remains a much more familiar configuration for the representation of the experiences of non-white Americans. As a critical community, we may have difficulty reconciling the real-life experiences (as captured by Smith's authentic text) of racially marginalized individuals with traditional artistic endeavor, but we are well-versed in the images of people of color which proliferate on the tv news. Smith, by achieving a large measure of mainstream media success with her plays, held the potential to trouble our cultural preconceptions. The (successful) critical strategy which re-writes her plays as journalism in many ways diminishes this potential.

The Body of the Community

The two things which distinguish Smith's work from other contemporary documentary dramatists are her insistent questioning of foundational assumptions about American character and her use of her body on stage. Both of these characteristics are specifically related to the complicated racial subjects her plays address. They are also functions of the documentary text she employs. On an obvious level, the found text of the plays allows Smith to be "cast" in a variety of racial and ethnic roles which would undoubtedly be closed to her in a more traditional play. It is unlikely, for example, that Smith would be cast in a mainstream theatre production of The Sisters Rosensweig, because her race would prevent her from pulling off a "believable" performance as a

middle-aged Jewish woman. In her own documentary plays, however, the authentic text provides Smith with a legitimate claim to an identity contraindicated by her race. Additionally, her solo performance is not subject to the conceits of traditional realism which usually requires each actor to maintain a consistent character identity throughout a given play. In an important way, the media's acceptance of the authenticity of Smith's text is supported by her choice to perform solo.⁷²

In the many articles that focus on Smith as a virtuoso performer, she is repeatedly praised for her ability to believably represent as many as 25 characters in the course of one evening. Smith possesses substantial talent as an impersonator, although she rejects that encapsulation of her work. The Newsweek review of Fires starts by claiming that Smith's acting bears out Walt Whitman's claim "I am large, I contain multitudes" and ends by calling her "the ideal theatre artist of the '90's."⁷³ The adulation for Smith's performance skills often focuses on her ability to present not just a great number of individual characters, but characters of different races and ethnicities without the trappings of traditional theatre: "In Fires, Smith assumes 26 identities to portray the complexity of both the Jewish and black communities . . . [transcending] age, ethnicity, and color, unaided by makeup or dramatic costume changes. What she does employ is a remarkable human instrument."⁷⁴ Most of the theatre reviews seem fascinated with

⁷² The reliance on Smith's performing body to authenticate the found text became apparent when Smith's House Arrest, was given its first production in Washington DC in 1999. The documentary play was performed by a company of actors, and the production was not well received. Ultimately, when Smith moved the play to New York for a Public Theater Production in the Spring of 2000, she again chose to play all of the roles.

⁷³ Kroll, 74.

⁷⁴ Itabari Njeri, "A Mirror on Our Fires," Los Angeles Times, 14 June 1994, sec. Calendar, p. 4.

Smith's capacity to embody a diverse array of racial subjects: "she doesn't come to sit in judgment on her characters, she comes to sit inside of them – or as she says, to see how their words feel on her body."⁷⁵ The critical press often celebrates Smith's acting ability by emphasizing the apparent contradiction between her self, her performing body, and the diverse races, genders, ages, and social classes of the people she portrays.

This complicates the relationship between Smith's offstage work as playwright and her onstage work as performer. In performance, the presumably authentic text of the interviewees comes directly from Smith's mouth, blurring the lines between reality and theatre. The text is authentic, but not authentically Smith's. The experience represented is Smith's, as she conducted the original interviews, but the language is not her own. Adjectives such as "authentic" and "real" become slippery when applied to this performance. Identifying the race of the speaker is likewise difficult, which challenges traditional notions that racial categories are both stable and identifiable. Smith's practice, which assumes that identity is both fixed (located in the authentic language of the interviewee) and fluid (transferable by the act of embodying that authentic text), seriously disrupts existing critical strategies concerning the construction of racial identity.

Smith's work, which in some ways seems to rely on and celebrate the notion that authentic language can provide transparent access to unmediated reality, actually deconstructs this notion by repeatedly emphasizing the constructed nature of experience. Smith acknowledges that her work potentially reinforces the idea that reality itself is racially-determined :

Many of us who work in race relations do so from the point of view of our own

⁷⁵ Tate, 98.

ethnicity. This very fact inhibits our ability to hear more voices than those that are closest to us in proximity. Few people speak a language about race that is not their own . . . few of us can really look at the story of race in its complexity and its scope.⁷⁶

She attributes this lack to existing educational and cultural institutions which do not provide the tools for entering such a dialogue: "Our institutions have not facilitated the growth of such a person -- one who can speak for more than just himself. Nothing is encouraging the growth of that hybrid flower."⁷⁷ Smith offers her performance, and her body, as a location in which individuals can transcend identity barriers and learn to listen and speak differently. Smith has explicitly articulated the socio-political goals for her performances in language which looks hopefully to the possibility of a multi-racial community: "I like it when the audience learns about each other, not just about me and not just about the material . . . there's a way in which this style of theatre forms a community."⁷⁸

The "community of difference" Smith hopes to find in the audience mirrors her performing body on stage, as she attempts to display a multitude of identities on the same site. She figures the authentic language she uses as both the medium by which these identities are established, and the means by which their boundaries are traversed. Smith has addressed this interface between language and the boundaries of identity numerous times, as in the introduction to Twilight: "If we were able to move more frequently

⁷⁶ Smith, Twilight, xxv.

⁷⁷ Proffitt, M3.

⁷⁸ Stayton, 22.

beyond those boundaries, we would develop multifaceted identities and . . . a more complex language."⁷⁹ In Smith's equation, language is both that which confines individuals to fixed positions and the key to acquiring a fuller understanding of the ways such fixed positions prove illusory. She examines the critical intersection between authentic language and identity in an attempt to expand the notion of both categories: "I am first looking for the humanness inside the problems or crises. The spoken word is evidence of the humanness. Perhaps the solutions come somewhere further down the road."⁸⁰ Her dramatic texts afford an opportunity for performers (not just Smith) and audiences to question the role of language in the creation of harmful racial stereotypes and practice the creation of communities of diversity.

However, the majority of the critical responses to the show considered language only as an indication of the fixed identity of the original speaker, ignoring those performative aspects in which the notion of a fixed identity is elusive or even impossible. Again, the assumption that material drawn from real life affords unmediated access to an ontologically authentic experience ultimately works against Smith's desire to explore the socially constructed nature of reality. Those critics and arts officials who read her plays as journalism manipulate traditional assumptions about reality to devalue her artistic contribution. This phenomenon is hardly surprising. It speaks to our cultural and critical difficulty over enjoining a productive discussion of race and racial difference in any truly complicated way. Smith has recognized this incapacity in prevailing discussions of race, and is firmly critical of our collective complacency: "There is still something disturbing

⁷⁹ Smith, *Twilight*, xxv.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Twilight*, xxiv.

about otherwise fully educated people who can't talk about questions of race and the differences between people."⁸¹ The controversy indicates how far we have to go in our attempts to broaden the language and focus of theatre, let alone effect real social change in our ever more complicated world. Smith's work, and the mainstream's rejection of it as full-fledged "drama," remain important points of contention and potential advancement in this struggle.

⁸¹ Proffitt, M3.

CHAPTER FOUR

NO REAL THREAT:

BILL T. JONES AND THE VICTIM ART CONTROVERSY

When I dance, as when I talk, I strive for candor. I trust that candor offers an essential aspect of real identity – not my nor anyone else’s fiction, not a scenario imposed on me – but a reflection of what truly is. Yet, as everyone else, I am afraid of what truly is.

– Bill T. Jones, Last Night on Earth

In 1994, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company premiered their much anticipated work Still/Here at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.¹ The piece was the result of many months of work by Bill T. Jones and the rest of the company, who had visited many different sites across the nation and conducted dance workshops with a variety of people suffering from various kinds of life-threatening illnesses. Videotape from the workshops was used as inspiration for the movements of the dance, and the tape itself was part of the work’s scenic design. Immediately after the very successful opening of Still/Here, preeminent dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a scathing commentary about the dance and the process behind its creation for The New Yorker magazine.² In her article,

¹ Still/Here premiered on December 17, 1994 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

² Croce’s importance as a figure in the contemporary dance world is most fully explored by Diana Theodore in First We Take Manhattan (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996). “Discussing the Undiscussable” appeared in The New Yorker, 26 December 1994, 54-60. By that time, Croce had been writing about dance for The New Yorker for over twenty years.

“Discussing the Undiscussable,” Croce launched a fluid and inflammatory attack against Bill T. Jones as a choreographer, against reality-based dance as a style, and against the state of the arts in general. She assumes that Jones, who is HIV-positive, has no possible motivation besides the exploitation of the audience’s sympathy. Her comments range from the (anti-)personal to the (anti-) social with breathtaking nerve and flair, especially considering that she had not seen Still/Here when she wrote the review. The critical response to her essay was fast and furious within both the popular and scholarly press. The result was a wide-spread debate about the merit of reality-based art and the implications of postmodern artistic trends for the national imagination.

In dance, as in documentary drama and performance art, the precise boundaries between the real and the theatrical are extremely difficult to pin down. Dance both precedes and echoes performance art’s emphasis on the individual performing body. Traditional concert dance has typically obscured the relationship between art and life by abstracting movement and personality to their formal essence. Postmodern dance rejects this distillation, and Still/Here is a particularly fine example of dance infused with the immediacy of reality. The videotaped Survival Workshops, which inspired Jones’s choreography, provide a means by which the artist, the critic, the performers, the workshop participants and the audience transgress ideological boundaries of space and time. The threat which Croce perceives in Still/Here arises from this potential movement and instability. The videotapes and the sick people they present document a reality which disturbs existing power relations within the dance community. The real material disrupts aesthetic and artistic categories and made various movements into, out of, and across fields of power possible.

Before discussing the Still/Here controversy, it is necessary to briefly trace the history of and differences between modern and postmodern dance, and to explore traditional notions of dance criticism. The tensions which drove the Croce/Jones controversy – tensions over the inclusion of autobiographical or other real material in dance, the subversion of formalist artistic concerns to political content, and the personal relationship between critic (Croce) and artist (Jones) – were by no means new developments. Still/Here and its critical reception marked a confluence of on-going debates about the purpose of art and its relation to lived experience. The resulting controversy demonstrates the potential energy inherent in the material intersection between artistic endeavor and the real world. It also exposes a critical discomfort with the particular bodies Jones documents. I have discussed the way the NEA controversy reveals on-going anxiety about alternative sexualities, and explored how the debate over Anna Deavere Smith's plays manifests our cultural inability to address racial difference. Jones's personal identity is triply complicated by his overtly gay, African-American, HIV-positive status. His work, which was the central focus of the victim art debacle, is read through his various politicized identity positions, and as such is subject to a whole host of social anxieties about marginalized bodies.

Many of the critics who condemned Still/Here and art like it assume that the function of art is to provide glimpses of, or insight into, certain essential and universal "truths." One important assumption of this kind of criticism posits the imagined liberal humanist subject as the ideal representation of the human being. Jones's work, which is based in the material specificity of his and other particular bodies, refuses to allow these universal truths to go unquestioned. In fact, he interrogates the whole liberal humanist project. The tensions exposed in the controversy suggest a deeply felt critical anxiety

over the particular bodies of which concert dance will be composed and the populist impulses which influence the decision to include non-ideal bodies. Croce's disgust with the use of real live sick people and the emphasis on identity politics in postmodern dance betray larger critical concerns with the disintegration of high cultural forms. The debate raises several important questions. Whose experience will art represent, and how do identity politics play an important role in destabilizing the traditional art-critic-audience relationship? How does postmodern dance, which relies on the blending and disruption of distinct artistic genres, speak to a populist aesthetic? Is criticism superfluous when elite cultural forms are disrupted by pronounced and intentional mass appeal? How does the confounding of high and low forms upset expectations about audience behavior, status, and education? My hope is to tease out the complicated answers for each of these questions by looking specifically at the history of postmodern dance in America, the life work of Croce and Jones, Still/Here itself and Croce's response to it, and the compelling way Jones's use of real material informed each aspect of this debate.

Dances Modern and Postmodern

There is much on-going discussion in contemporary concert dance about the appropriate definition and application of the term "postmodern." Some dancers reject the label out of hand. Several of the choreographers interviewed for Michael Blackwood's 1988 documentary Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism, including Diane Martel and Stephen Petronio, consciously disassociate themselves from the label "postmodern" because of their sense that the term is limiting.³ Jack Anderson claims in

³ Michael Blackwood, prod., Retracing Steps: American Dance Since Postmodernism (New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1988). Videocassette.

Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History that many contemporary choreographers reject the term “postmodern” because they consider the label “pompous” or “unnecessary.”⁴ Anderson implies that the term is “awkward,” and rejects it because he figures postmodern dance as nothing more than a logical subdivision of modern dance.⁵ He attributes the capacity for innovation to modern, not postmodern, dance: “[T]he very diversity and continuing experimentation of contemporary choreography exemplify modern dance’s capacity for self-renewal.”⁶ He argues that modern dance is sufficiently eclectic and forward-thinking to include what some would call “postmodern” as a part of its own aesthetic.

Nevertheless, there has been a great deal of thoughtful and productive criticism which attempts to determine the qualities of postmodernism which best apply to dance. Sally Banes, one of the most important and prolific contemporary dance scholars, has done a great deal to delineate the category of postmodern dance as an aesthetic form in and of itself. Her book Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism (1994) characterizes important differences between the impulses of modern and postmodern dance. In her introduction, she establishes a lengthy repertoire of adjectives to describe the mode, demonstrating the difficulty of confining postmodernism to a single or even limited set of characteristics. A few of the most important descriptors she uses include “multicultural,” “concerned with the crossovers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ dance cultures,” “contextual,” “historical,” and “ethnographic.” She also proposes that

⁴ Jack Anderson, Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History (Princeton: Princeton Books, 1986), 170.

⁵ Jack Anderson, Art Without Boundaries (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 5.

⁶ Anderson, Ballet and Modern Dance, 170.

postmodern dance “includes within its vocabulary every available genre of dance, gleaned from the entire hierarchy of cultural levels.” In addition, she celebrates the postmodern dancer’s capacity to “restore the speaking voice to the dancer’s body.”⁷ All of these features of postmodern dance would become extremely important in the Croce/Jones controversy. Significantly, many of them, including an emphasis on multi-cultural and popular styles, would encourage the incorporation of real and identity-based material.

Although Banes’s characterization of the postmodern mode is primarily stylistic, much of what she considers postmodern dance begins after the mid-1960’s dance and performance experiments at the Judson Church in lower Manhattan. Banes and many other writers cite Judson Church, which includes artists like Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton, as the progenitor of an avant garde dance markedly different from that which had previously dominated the American concert dance scene.⁸ Banes asserts that the dancers who worked at Judson Church rejected many of the characteristics of modern dance which had flourished in America in the early twentieth century.⁹ Avant-garde dance has roots extending as far back as Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller and the other important early modern dancers.¹⁰ Modern dance, as it

⁷ Sally Banes, Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), xiv-xv.

⁸ For a thorough account of the practice and influence of the dancers who assembled in the mid-sixties at the Judson church, see Sally Banes, Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

⁹ Sally Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987), 2-3.

¹⁰ There are an enormous number of works about early modern dance in America. See, for example, Elizabeth Kendall, Where She Danced: American Dancing 1880-1930 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Don McDonagh, The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970); Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance (New York: Dance Horizons, 1979); and Marcia B. Siegel, The Shapes of Change:

developed in America, was in many ways opposed to neoclassical dance forms like ballet, which had dominated concert dance for much of the nineteenth century. In ballet, the ideal forms and structures of the dance took precedence over the body and identity of the individual performer. Ballet dancers and choreographers sought to achieve artistic perfection by making their bodies and movements conform to a pre-ordained aesthetic form.

Modern dance broke from this tradition, and emphasized each individual's ability (and, somehow, democratic right) to express universal themes as he or she saw fit. Anderson points to this liberation as one key element of modern dance: "One reason why modern dance is so hard to define is that it is not so much a system or technique as an attitude toward dance, a point of view that encourages individualism and development of personal choreographic styles."¹¹ The freedom of the individual body led to a renewed interest in choreography and eventually to the assumption that anyone was authorized to choreograph a dance. In her introduction to the "Modern Dance" section of Dance as a Theatre Art, Selma Jeanne Cohen claims, "Unlike ballet, in which few dancers wanted to do anything but perform, the modern dance was geared to stimulate creativity; if choreography was a representation of personal experience, an expression of individual feeling, then each was entitled to depict his own."¹² This emphasis on individual creativity and innovation would become an important aspect of both modern and

Images of American Dance (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985) as well as numerous biographical and autobiographical works about Duncan, Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, et al.

¹¹ Jack Anderson, Ballet and Modern Dance, 153.

¹² Selma Jeanne Cohen and Katy Matheson, eds., Dance as a Theatre Art (Princeton, NJ: Dance Horizons, 1992), 193.

postmodern dance aesthetics, and contributed to the rise of solo dance as one of the predominant forms of concert dance choreography. These dances, which celebrated the personal idiosyncrasies of the choreographer, would eventually lend themselves to an exploration of identity politics in postmodern dance.

In modern choreography, however, any sense of the personal was always contingent upon the idea that dance should express universal truths. Most modern choreographers manifested a certain preoccupation with a non-specific, mythologized sense of history. Seminal American modern dancers like Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and Martha Graham all created works which celebrated the way the individual soul, or in some cases, the individual culture, spoke to a larger, often mystical or archetypal framework. Duncan is a prime example of this impulse. Early on, her so-called “Egyptian” solos manifested the idea that the physical representation of some ancient mystical passage would evoke universal ideals of beauty and movement. The same tendency can be seen in Martha Graham’s interest in narratives of mystical/historical ecstasy and rapture, as evidenced by works like American Provincials (1934) and Appalachian Spring (1944).¹³ Although these dances draw on historical subjects, their aesthetics are decidedly more formalist than documentary, and any real-life material was abstracted to the point of essential artistic forms and mysticized for its potential ritual value. Dancers often enacted elaborate rituals based on iconic movements and gestures from ancient ceremonies, myths and legends. This impulse became so

¹³ See Joseph H. Mazo, Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America (New York: William Morrow, 1977) for a full analysis of these works by Duncan and Graham. See also Ann Daly, Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

pronounced that by the mid-fifties many choreographers felt that an over emphasis on mystical exotica and spirituality was turning modern dance into stilted pantomime.

In response, early postmodern choreographers developed a pronounced minimalist aesthetic. Banes describes the Judson Church dancers and subsequent choreographers as interested in investigating the essential quality of movement: “Analytic postmodern dance was consistent with – and consciously aligned itself with – the practice of minimalist sculpture. It was also fitting art for a post-Watergate, post-oil-crisis America – sober, factual, conservative in terms of energy and theatrical means.”¹⁴ Anderson explains that these early postmodern choreographers sought to reduce movement to its essence: “Believing that movement could be beautiful and enjoyable for its own sake, certain newer choreographers advocated a dance that was abstract, evocative, and non-literal.”¹⁵ Bill T. Jones himself has described the cool, minimalist aesthetic of these artists: “They said no to many, many things, of which virtuosity was one. No to illusion. No to charismatic performers. They said no to all of this . . . and then they proceeded to do these extremely minimal things, extremely unpredictable things.”¹⁶ While Jones acknowledges these choreographers were important influences on his art, he ultimately comes to embrace many of the features his predecessors had rejected. Tellingly, Jones rejects abstract minimalism in part because of his belief that these works were too far removed from the social and political context of reality.

In addition to an emphasis on minimalism, the early postmodern choreographers found inspiration in the movement and actions of everyday life. Anderson describes the

¹⁴ Banes, *Writing Dancing*, 307.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Ballet and Modern Dance*, 163.

¹⁶ Bill T. Jones interviewed in *Retracing Steps*.

way these artists found inspiration in the events and activities of daily existence: “Many of the Judson choreographers and the choreographers influenced by them used ordinary, even totally mundane, movements or borrowed movements from games and work activities.”¹⁷ Dances like English (Steve Paxton, 1963) and Homemade (Trisha Brown, 1965) reduced everyday actions to pure movement to display the aesthetic quality of quotidian motion. This emphasis on the everyday would ultimately foster the postmodern preoccupation with real life. Incorporating mundane, quotidian actions in the dance and celebrating the everyday lives of choreographers and performers eventually led postmodern artists to prefer dances infused with real life material.

Jones and other postmodern choreographers of his generation developed a choreographic style that questioned the existing avant-garde dance aesthetic. Banes figures these artists as a second wave of postmodern choreography, with a style and methodology quite distinct from the earlier dancers: “A younger generation emerged in the 1979-80 season, including Bill T. Jones, Arnie Zane, Jim Self, Johanna Boyce, Molissa Fenley, Karole Armitage – who, themselves impatient with the seemingly puritanical seriousness and dry asceticism of the analytical approach, independently found various means to reinstate theatricality while remaining committed to the avant-garde venue.”¹⁸ Jones’s choreography clearly exhibits many of these new impulses. He explicitly rejects minimalism and celebrates the theatricality of concert dance in his description of Balancing the World (1979), which reflects his burgeoning interest in the visual aspects of dance: “The theatricalization and costuming were in keeping with what Arnie and I were thinking at the time . . . As a visual artists and a photographer, Arnie had

¹⁷Anderson, Ballet and Modern Dance, 168.

¹⁸ Banes, Writing Dancing, 308.

always been aware of the way things looked, but now we both became more concerned about production, lighting, sets, costume. Our dancers began to wear makeup, and hairstyles became a consideration.”¹⁹ The rediscovered interest in the theatrical quality of concert dance encouraged postmodern choreographers to collaborate with other kinds of artists, including the video artists whose work would become so important in the Still/Here controversy.

This burgeoning theatricality also reintroduced an emphasis on narrative and supported the inclusion of spoken text in a previously non-verbal form. Banes asserts that many choreographers included spoken text in an attempt to increase the purposefulness and usefulness of a dance:

If in the sixties and seventies we were content to let the artworks simply be, rather than mean. and to let criticism describe, rather than interpret, in the eighties we want to find substance and order in an increasingly recalcitrant world. One method of installing meaning in dance, the most nonverbal of the arts, is in fact to appropriate language and language-like systems.²⁰

Jones has been incorporating text – spoken by the dancers, sung by a musician, inscribed on the scenic design – in his dances throughout much of his career. It is an obvious connection between the physically abstract world of dance and the traces of everyday life so important to Jones’s work.

Additionally, Jones’s penchant for incorporating events from his personal experience recalls Banes’ description of the autobiographical impulse in postmodern art:

¹⁹ Bill T. Jones with Peggy Gillespie, Last Night on Earth (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 162-3. This is Jones’s autobiography. It provides an extensive personal account of his life and art.

²⁰ Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers, xxvii.

“One outgrowth of the revival of narrative is an emphasis on the genre of autobiography, a result, perhaps, of the synthesis of new narrative concerns with the personal, intimate mode of performance that emerged . . . as boundaries between performer and spectator, art and life were challenged.”²¹ Banes goes on to assert that as these artists turned to personal experience as inspiration, they often ultimately used these experiences to explore some larger political or social issue. Jones developed an especially strong interest in the social context of dance: “But I thought what we were doing was making it real, bringing it into a more challenging arena, which was the arena that I thought united us outside of the aesthetic. That is, cultural and historical problems that we were having as a nation, as a country, as a people.”²² His reference to the inclusion of political content is typical, as the post-Judson choreographers have consistently demonstrated a much greater interest in political content than their immediate predecessors. Jones claims, “The world, the country, had witnessed the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, had acknowledged Stonewall, and women’s rights were being hotly debated. This spirit challenged us to ‘step on out there and do what you need to do.’”²³ In response to this “challenge,” Jones created a body of work including impassioned solos, innovative duets, and large scale company dances which explicitly engage the politics of sexuality, race and history.

While political content in postmodern dance is sometimes explicit, it is also reflected in the postmodern tendency to question the traditional, very limited notion of the

²¹ Ibid., xxx.

²² Quoted in Ann Daly, “Bill T. Jones in Conversation with Ann Daly,” Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk and Bill T. Jones, ed. Pamela Johnson and Kathleen McLean (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1998), 119.

²³ Quoted in Thelma Golden, “Bill T. Jones in Conversation with Thelma Golden,” Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk and Bill T. Jones, ed. Pamela Johnson and Kathleen McLean (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1998), 135.

appropriate dancing body. This meant that more (and more diverse) people felt entitled to choreograph and perform. Many postmodern choreographers have demonstrated a propensity to experiment with dancers who do not fit the requirements of the traditional (read tall, slender, able-bodied, and most often white) dancer.²⁴ Arnie Zane specifically addresses the political statements inherent in the inclusion of diverse individuals in serious concert dance:

[N]o matter how hard you try and say, 'I do not make political work,' your structures, etc. will come in, in your choices of people, the individual you put before the eye, how you use men in relation to women, women in relation to women, men in relation to men – these are all political decisions that will come forth in the work.²⁵

Critics responding to the duets Zane performed with Jones have been prone to comment about Zane's own short, stocky body. Another specific example of Jones's inclination to involve non-traditional dance bodies is Larry Goldhuber, one of the notable and long-standing performers in the BTJ/AZ Company. Goldhuber, who did perform in Still/Here, is larger and heavier than most slim, muscular contemporary male dancers. Critics often remark on Goldhuber's presence because of his body size.²⁶

Postmodern artists and sympathetic critics figure these challenges to the concept of the "appropriate dancing body" as positive political and social statements about the possibilities for concert dance. In some ways, their assertion relies on the notion that the

²⁴ See Bill T. Jones, "You Don't Have to be Thin to Dance," The New York Times, 19 July 1997, A19.

²⁵ Zane interviewed in Retracing Steps.

²⁶ In "Discussing the Undiscussable," Croce does not refer to Goldhuber by name, but she does criticize companies that employ "overweight dancers" (55).

non-traditional dancers, who are often non-professional dancers (i.e., “real” people from “real” life), more accurately represent the diverse sizes and shapes of the human form. Others see this on-going trend in a less favorable light. Marcia Siegel claims that it portends the decline of dance as a serious art form: “The democratizing ideals which inspired the Judson and postmodern dancers to invent ‘people dances’ and adopt the look of ordinary people on the street have, ironically, assisted in the gradual erosion of high art across American culture.”²⁷ Siegel’s concern for the status of “high art” forms in America is telling. The tension between high art aesthetics and populist impulses was laid bare in the Croce/Jones controversy. In many ways, the debate asked who makes, sees, and writes about art, and by what authority they do so. These are extremely complicated questions; before discussing them further, I must examine the controversy itself: the major players, the specific art work which ignited the public debate, and Croce’s provocative critical essay.

Protagonist/Antagonist

Bill T. Jones was born in Florida in 1952 to an impoverished family, which supported itself by sharecropping and eventually settled in upstate New York. Critic Kellie Jones claims that the material differences between the “rural, black South” and the “white world of upstate New York” created in the young Jones an acute awareness of his own racial identity in varying social contexts. She suggests that these acute political sensibilities, which emphasized the way social politics effected families and individuals,

²⁷ Marcia Siegel, The Tail of the Dragon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), xv.

would ultimately come to bear on his performance practice.²⁸ In the early 1970's, Jones enrolled at the State University of New York–Binghamton and shortly thereafter became involved with fellow student Arnie Zane, a Jewish-Italian-American with a passionate interest in art history and photography. The two would go on to share a personal and professional partnership that lasted until Zane succumbed to AIDS in 1988. They joined with their friend Lois Welk in 1973 to form a company called the American Dance Asylum, their first joint venture in dance. They also co-founded the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in 1982. Jones has been commissioned to produce dances for an impressive array of companies and venues, including the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. He is Resident Choreographer of the Lyon Opera Ballet, and he has collaborated with a stunning array of artists from many different fields, including Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Toni Morrison and Max Roach. In 1994, he received a MacArthur (“Genius”) Fellowship.

Throughout his career, Jones has developed a reputation for infusing the wide array of dance forms he employs with specific personal and political material. Direct audience address, which was sometimes overtly confrontational, was often the means by which Jones communicated his personal material to the audience. For example, his early solo from Everybody Works! (1975) illustrates his propensity to combine autobiographical narrative with abstract dance movement. The dance was performed to a musical background combining blues sung by Jesse Fuller and improvised vocalizations by Zane and a friend. Jones describes the dance:

²⁸ Kellie Jones, “Curator’s Introduction,” in Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, and Bill T. Jones, ed. Pamela Johnson and Kathleen McLean (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), 117.

I'd stride out across the stage. Barefoot, wearing a suit, a white shirt, and tie. I was a demented preacher or an off-duty waiter. I directed Jesse's refrain from my feet, thighs, and buttocks to my pumping arms and mugging face . . . When this segment finished, I began to tell a story while repeating numerical hand gestures . . . As I told this story, I stripped to the shorts I wore beneath my suit and ended by spinning in a circle, shouting, *I love you. I love you. I love you.*²⁹

This kind of direct address would become a staple of Jones's solos. Croce would eventually denounce this practice as "Jones going wild: haranguing the audience or working himself into an emotional frenzy."³⁰ Jones himself admits that he sometimes attempts to "alienate an audience" by performing solos that are "confessional, often painful, taking unpleasant emotions and exposing them spontaneously in a fashion that was brutal on both the audience and me." He goes on to acknowledge that the response to these confrontational solos is often confusion and anger on the part of critics, the audience, and other dance professionals: "My anger – and my vehemence in expressing it – shaped the way I was perceived for many years to come. I wasn't invited back to the American Dance Festival for ten years."³¹

His duets with Zane were less likely to result in overtly hostile critical responses, but were remarkable just the same. These duets were of interest initially because of the radical reconfiguring of the classic *pas de deux* with two untraditional bodies. Here again Jones celebrates the relationship between his life and his art: "The magic in our love was

²⁹ Jones, *Last Night On Earth*, 135-6. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Arlene Croce, *Sight Lines* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 63.

³¹ Jones, *Last Night On Earth*, 165.

the shared belief that life was something rhapsodic, heroic, that one should run out to meet. We would do whatever we had to do to serve up this something in dance.”³² Contrary to those critics (including Croce) who would claim the work rejected any formalist structure, Jones himself claims that these duets are especially good examples of formalist dance. He asserts that the trilogy Monkey Run Road (1979), Blauvelt Mountain (1980), and Valley Cottage (1981) are “intensely formalist works in terms of the way space was delineated and the way material was introduced and manipulated. The overall impression was of watching a puzzle being worked out.”³³ Many other critics have noted the formalist structure of these works. Kellie Jones describes the “style” of early BTJ/AZ collaborations as, “based on spare constructivist moves, distillations of the lessons of modernism.”³⁴ Daly suggests that these works are excellent examples of a productive tension between “form on the one hand and ‘truth’ on the other hand.”³⁵ The duets represent a striking combination of aesthetic and personal material. They expose a productive tension between artistic form and real-life material.

Jones’s use of autobiographical and other real-life material is often meant to expressly address social concerns. For example, the story told in the solo described above from Everybody Works! tells of the twelve-year-old Jones responding to his aunts’ invective against interracial marriage. Social Intercourse: Pilgrim’s Progress (1981) explores one day in the life a New Yorker subject to manifold social pressures. In the epic Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land (1990), Jones uses the life

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ Daly, “Bill T. Jones in Conversation,” 120.

³⁴ Kellie Jones, 116.

³⁵ Daly, “Bill T. Jones In Conversation,” 120.

experiences of various company members, real interaction with community leaders, and iconic American and religious texts to produce a dance which addressed the history of black people in America. The dance combines real historical individuals, found text from a variety of documents, fictional characters, and personal narrative in a momentous inquiry into race and religion.³⁶

Still/Here was also not the first occasion on which Jones had used real material documenting illness; D-Man in the Waters (1989) was designed as a meditation on illness and death, specifically the impending AIDS death of company member Damian Acquavella. D-Man was a striking example of Jones's forthright confrontation of illness and his willingness to present the unhealthy body on stage. Jones describes the dance:

I promised Damian there would be a place for him in the dance. As he could no longer walk by the time of the debut, in 1989, I carried him on stage, offering my legs as he executed the arm movements of what would have been his solo. When Damian could no longer perform, I chose not to replace him in the piece. Oddly asymmetrical groupings now mark his absence.³⁷

Ann Cooper Albright has written about this moment and the contentious critical response it engendered, saying that the criticism reflects "a deep fear that the emotional impact of the 'real' (read grotesque) body will get in the way of a more intellectual appreciation of

³⁶ Last Supper... has been extensively documented and analyzed by a number of important critics. See Ann Cooper Albright, Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997) and Randy Martin, Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Practice (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). In addition, a documentary about the dance is widely available on videotape as Dancing to the Promised Land (New York : VIEW Video, c1994).

³⁷ Jones, Last Night On Earth, 194.

Jones's choreographic composition."³⁸ Albright's comments foreshadow the multifaceted cultural anxieties that were activated in the victim art controversy. Croce's objections to Still/Here assume that the incursion of 'real' material, specifically when that material documents the frailty of the human body, upstages the artistic component of a work so as to preclude any meaningful critical dialogue.

Arlene Croce (b. 1934) has been writing about dance on a regular basis for much of the last thirty years. Her commitment to both dance and dance criticism is well-documented; her history bears out her contention that both are worthy of serious intellectual pursuit.³⁹ In 1965, for example, Croce founded Ballet Review in an attempt to provide a forum for her own critical reviews and simultaneously prove that dance is worthy of critical attention.⁴⁰ In the early 1970's she became a regular contributor to The New Yorker, which gave her the opportunity to see a great number of dances and to "write as soon after the event as possible," which she believes is "best."⁴¹ Throughout her career, Croce has been known as an extremely demanding critic; Diana Theodores points out that Croce gave more negative reviews than any other contributor to Ballet Review.⁴² Her critical style is passionately subjective, and she is not inclined to pull punches; a glance through her collected essays discovers reviews entitled "Bad Smells,"

³⁸ Ann Cooper Albright, Choreographing Difference, 75. In this section, Albright also suggests that it was perhaps D-Man... and not Still/Here that Croce had in mind when writing "Discussing the Undiscussable."

³⁹ See Diana Theodores, First We Take Manhattan, for Croce's professional biography. Theodores' book is extremely useful to this discussion as it documents and analyzes Croce's style and critical methods.

⁴⁰ Theodores, 114.

⁴¹ Arlene Croce, "Preface," Afterimages (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), ix.

⁴² Theodores, 114.

“Bad News,” “Hard Facts,” and “Slouching Toward Byzantium.”⁴³ Her writing is also characterized by a biting wit; in 1974 she wrote of a trip to Sweden: “On a desperate night in Stockholm, one can throw oneself into the canal or go to the Royal Swedish Ballet.”⁴⁴ Croce’s negative response to Still/Here is not an isolated incident of critical malice. Her tone and style must be understood in the context of her typical artistic rigor.

In addition, Croce’s criticism manifests certain underlying formalist assumptions about the nature of artistic endeavor and its appropriate critical response. Formalism can briefly and reductively be described as critical and artistic theory that would discover meaning and evaluate art based solely on its internal structures. An artwork is seen as a closed, self-contained object whose meaning is derived from the exacting relationship between its component parts. Formalist criticism presumes that a specific internal logic is requisite in any given artistic genre. A particular work succeeds or fails based on its ability to fulfill these pre-established structural criteria. Gay Morris notes that this formalist impetus has been creating tension in dance criticism for the past three decades:

The impetus to place dance within the larger framework of culture has been going on since the 1970’s . . . but for a number of years this trend moved against a tide of formalist-dominated critical and historical writing in which it was believed that the vast majority of meaning resided in movement alone.⁴⁵

⁴³ All of these essays are published in Sight Lines (1987).

⁴⁴ Croce, Afterimages, 104.

⁴⁵ Gay Morris, “Introduction,” Moving Words: Re-writing Dance (London: Routledge, 1996), 8. Morris and several other authors in this book also acknowledge the great value of formalist dance criticism. Morris reiterates Marcia Siegel’s argument that formalist criticism is “what pried dance scholarship out of the mire of anecdote and myth in the first place” (11).

Theodores names “objectified expression, integrated invention, diversifying through clarifying, [and] purity of means” as those goals of concert dance embraced by formalist dance criticism.⁴⁶ All of these recall the criteria Croce routinely uses to evaluate concert dance.

To some extent, this emphasis on form eschews in-depth analysis of content. It also disdains the extensive examination of art works in their political or social context. Both of these features discourage the inclusion of any specific reference to the real life of the artist or the material circumstances of a dance’s production. Although Croce and other formalist critics by no means disregard the meaning of a dance, they are most likely to celebrate the successful display of precise and beautiful technical form. Their method assumes that aesthetic ideals are transcendent, universal, and not subject to constraints of individual circumstance. This is crucial to my investigation because the formalist depreciation of content and social context impedes any overt connection between the dance and lived reality. Croce’s critical style exemplifies a formalist analysis which disdains the inclusion of real-life material. This sets her at odds with Jones’s impulse to emphasize any and all connections between his art and his life.

Croce, whose foremost love is ballet, often relies on the notion that artists are primarily accountable to a genre’s ideal forms. In essays such as “Love-Song Waltzes,” which explores several of Balanchine’s abstract pieces, she attempts to debunk the idea that “people are more deeply moved by ballets with a story or the consequences of one.”⁴⁷ In “Slowly Then the History of Them Comes Out,” she outlines a formalist agenda for

⁴⁶ Theodores, 44. In this section of her book, Theodores provides a useful gloss of the basic contentions of formalism and its relation to dance criticism. See pp. 39-45.

⁴⁷ Croce, Sight Lines, 199.

modern dance as exemplified in the relationship between Merce Cunningham and John Cage: “A dance to a Cage score is also likely to be constructed according to the same laws as the music – laws of ‘repetitive structure and modular form,’ to quote a recent program note”⁴⁸ This structural emphasis leads Croce to prefer precise technical execution, deliberate choreography and highly structured form. Her ubiquitous model of dance and choreography is Balanchine, but she by no means rejects modern dance, finding Paul Taylor commendable because he has “the largest and clearest rhythm” and “the fewest shapes and steps and postures.”⁴⁹ Theodores asserts that “the manipulation of medium, adherence to codes of style, the trust in the inherent values of an enduring, classic dance vocabulary and the taste to know how to probe that vocabulary” are the hallmarks of Croce’s critical language.⁵⁰

Croce’s emphasis on classical and ideal forms often leads her to compare a dance performance to previous versions of the same or a similar piece, rather than exploring the social context or political ideologies of a particular production. She brings her exhaustive critical repertory to bear on these reviews, which exhibit her comprehensive knowledge of the history of dance, music, and society. For example, in one review of a Baryshnikov production of Cinderella (1984), Croce references specific notations of the original Prokofiev musical score, compares the Baryshnikov dancers with a century’s worth of previous performers, and discusses the relationship of the ballet to Stalinist Russia.⁵¹ This amount of intertextual reference is typical of her writing and may reflect Croce’s

⁴⁸ Arlene Croce, Going to the Dance (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 285.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰ Theodores, 126.

⁵¹ Croce, Sight Lines, 194-198.

self-appointed role as educator of the mass audience. Croce is not alone in her assumption that one important aspect of the critic's role is the education of the audience. Dance critic William Moore puts forth a similar belief that the primary role of the critic is to assist the audience in the appreciation of worthy dance art: "A good critic does not evaluate or criticize in the limited journalistic sense. He educates the public in a field in which it has little or no knowledge."⁵² Theodores approvingly relates how seriously Croce undertakes this aspect of her profession, although her comments again betray the elitist assumptions that seem to imbue so much of Croce's criticism:

On the one hand she plays guardian to an elite and esoteric art form . . . trying to create serious attention for it and not suffering audiences who respond only to its immediate sensational value . . . On the other hand, Croce pleads for . . . willingness to look at what is before them in the dance rather than to ask what it means. Perhaps the link between these two poles is the role of the critic in teaching an audience how to look at the dance and how to acquire two essential qualities when looking, taste and imagination.⁵³

Croce's criticism reveals her sense that she is simultaneously responsible to protect dance as a serious, high art form and to educate the audience about the appropriate classical forms which should apply. She assumes that the real life material used in Still/Here frustrates both of these critical goals. Croce's formalist tendencies in many ways preclude a positive response to Jones's personal, confrontational, political and eclectic style.

⁵² William Moore, quoted in John W. English's Criticizing the Critics (New York: Hastings House, 1979), 191.

⁵³ Theodores, 124-5.

In addition to Croce's formalist inclinations, she has repeatedly expressed a pronounced disdain for many of the features of postmodern dance in general. In response to the postmodern tendency to use performers without classical dance training, Croce bluntly comments: "I have never understood the appeal of unskilled labor in the performing arts; still less do I understand why the unskilled should wish to appear downright stupid."⁵⁴ Her language bespeaks an elitist rejection of the democratizing impulse of postmodern dance; those "unskilled" laborers (lower class workers) who would deign take the stage are not only unappealing, they are "stupid" to believe they have anything to offer an appropriately disciplined audience. She also rejects the incorporation of spoken text so common in postmodern dance, claiming that words in dance "haven't sounded right to me. Either the dancing reports what the words are already saying or it strays so far from the verbal meaning that I can't guess what connects the two."⁵⁵ Her comment assumes that meaning in dance is apparent to anyone with the appropriate training in classical dance vocabulary and forms. Her formalist and classical dance criticism has little room for many of the innovations of postmodern dance, innovations which often reassert the art's relation to the real.

Clearly, then, Croce and Jones have many longstanding artistic differences, and their well-publicized relationship has born out their mutual enmity. "Discussing the Undiscussable" was not the first instance of public animosity between them. Croce had lashed out at Jones on several previous occasions. In one of the most striking examples of their acrimonious relationship, Croce wrote an extended reproach of Jones's work in a New Yorker article on July 12, 1982. In it, she criticizes Jones for his undisciplined

⁵⁴ Croce, Sight Lines, 91.

⁵⁵ Croce, Going to the Dance, 130.

choreography, hints that he is not talented or well-trained enough to get into the chorus of a Broadway show, and accuses him of advocating a style which will lead to the ruin of modern dance: "Jones is the apostle of postmodern pop; he has marched the New Narcissism right into the fever swamps."⁵⁶ Not to be outdone, Jones responded by naming his subsequent dance, a commission for the Alvin Ailey company, "Fever Swamps."⁵⁷ Croce cites these events in "Discussing the Undiscussable" as one more example of Jones's resistance to critical interpretation: "Jones's message . . . was clear: No back talk! Anything you say not only will be held against you, but may be converted into grist for further paranoid accusation."⁵⁸

As a critic who has spent a good portion of her career encouraging the audience to apply universal standards to dance, much about postmodern dance upsets Croce's world view. The use of non-dancers (untrained dancers) and the remarkable self-reliance of the postmodern dancer has contributed to a radically re-invented relationship between the dancer on stage and the (potential) dancer in the audience, a relationship that leaves little space for the art critic. It may indeed be that Still/Here and dances like it are undiscussable in the traditional sense, or at least they seem to make instructive formalist criticism superfluous. The real-life experiences of living, and in the case of Still/Here, dying, are the source of meaning in the piece. Again, the criticism assumes that material drawn from reality needs no critical interpretation but can communicate directly with the audience. Croce, and many critics like her, would prefer to mediate between the art and

⁵⁶ Croce, Going to the Dance, 63.

⁵⁷ See Marcia Pally, "A Guest Artist Brings a Dance to the Ailey," New York Times, 8 May 1983, C19(L).

⁵⁸ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," 54.

the audience in order to assure that traditional standards and ideals are upheld. Her (incorrect) perception that Still/Here displays unmediated suffering to the audience speaks to the common misreading of the mixed genre forms so prevalent in postmodern art.

Croce's overt discomfort with the real material used in Still/Here and her desire to reinforce the boundaries between art and life bespeak the critic's apprehension over the potential confusion of high and low art. It also reveals a deep social anxiety about the effect that the documentation of marginalized bodies and identities might have on traditional social and artistic arrangements. She believes that Jones's sensational appeal to the audience foregoes any formalist structure or transcendent interest. Ironically, Jones himself sees his project as largely concerned with transcendence, as he strives to create a work whose significance is not limited by the presence of particular, temporal individuals. To fully understand the nature of Croce's misconceptions and the motivation behind her attack, I must now undertake a brief examination of the process and product of Still/Here.

Still/Here

The creative process behind Still/Here had been widely publicized in the months prior to its opening, including but not limited to extensive features on Jones in The New Yorker, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, and New York Magazine.⁵⁹ Jones became interested in the subject of critical illness after his own HIV diagnosis, but was unwilling to rely solely on his own experience for the substance of the piece. He

⁵⁹ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Body Politic," The New Yorker, 28 November 1994, 112-18, 120-24; Elizabeth Kaye, "Bill T. Jones," The New York Times Magazine, 6 March 1994, 30-33; and Tobi Tobias, "Bill T. Jones Makes Choreographic Art Out of Tragedy," New York Magazine, 10 September 1990, 10.

subsequently spent several months traveling around the United States, conducting “Survival Workshops” with dozens of individuals, all living with a life-threatening illness. He did not focus on any particular disease, but interacted with a wide variety of individuals from diverse backgrounds, ages, and social situations. In the four-hour workshops, Jones led the participants through a series of verbal and physical exercises designed to help them develop physical expressions for their life experiences. While Jones conducted the workshops, an audio-visual crew recorded them. Jones culled images, text, and gestures from these videotapes to create the performance vocabulary of *Still/Here*, and his collaborator Gretchen Bender used segments of the tapes in the visual design of the piece.

The dance, then, illustrates three of the recurrent features of postmodern dance: an emphasis on autobiographical content, the incorporation of text in the dance, and the use of multimedia forms. In this case, all three of these elements reinforce the work’s connection to the real. Jones incorporates text and autobiographical content by incorporating words from the workshop interviews into the lyrics of the score and gestures and images from the workshop participants into the movements of the dance. The tapes of the workshops, including images of Jones himself, are an important part of the visual design, emphasizing the artistic usefulness of video. *Still/Here* is Jones’s ambitious attempt to create an epic concert dance piece based in the material reality of those living with serious illnesses.

None of the workshop participants appeared live on stage, and Jones himself did not dance in the piece. Rather, it was performed entirely by the professional dancers of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company (BTJ Company), who danced and interacted with the videotaped clips of the workshops to create the performance text of *Still/Here*. The

most notably absent survivor is Jones himself. As noted above, Jones does not always dance in the pieces he choreographs, but his absence from the Still/Here is compelling for a number of reasons. It is the clearest way in which he aligns himself with the workshop participants and their space and time, although his voice and video image permeate the stage with his virtual presence. Jones has characterized his videotaped images as his “message in a bottle, a missive, best read in the future perhaps, when I am no longer here.”⁶⁰ Jones specifically hopes the dance and his videotaped participation in it survive beyond his physical body. As Jones’s HIV-positive status is public knowledge, his choice to remain off-stage evokes the understanding that the piece could continue to be performed should he become too ill to dance. Jones acknowledges that this was indeed one of his goals for the piece, to transcend the limits of bodily existence. Thus Jones’s public personae, as well as his HIV status, become the real-life touchstones which infuse the dance with meaning, and expose the work to the accusations of victim art.

The curtain opens to reveal a line of dancers, one behind the other, who successively speak the names of various participants of Jones’s survival workshops.⁶¹ After each name is spoken, the group enacts a gesture, each with a bit of spoken text elaborating on the gesture’s meaning. As the dance proceeds, it becomes clear that each performed gesture signifies one of the workshop participants and the individual outlook

⁶⁰ Jones, Last Night On Earth, 266.

⁶¹ All specific textual descriptions of Still/Here are taken from my own notes, having viewed the piece on videotape at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. As I only witnessed the dance on videotape, my experience of it is mediated and framed by this context. I could, for example, manipulate the dance to take notes and clarify movements and meanings. I offer a description of the dance here not as straightforward performance review, but to provide an indication of how Jones used real-life material and to establish a sense of the performance.

they brought to the workshop. Some of the gestures relate specifically to the survivor's critically ill status; some do not. Eventually, the enactment of the gestures swells into dance, as music begins under the repeated motions of the dancers. Throughout these opening moments, the dancers establish a vocabulary of specific movements, a glossary of sorts, which will become the basis of the language of the dance to follow.⁶² They perform these gestures successively and in various combinations, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, to firmly establish a repertoire of movements with specific connotations in the mind of the audience. These movements resurface continually throughout Still/Here, and are the most obvious connection between the participants of the workshop and the dancers on stage.

As the dancers move across the stage to position themselves for the second movement, a litany of names is played in voice-over. The sound editing makes it clear that these are the names of the participants spoken within the workshop itself: a "roll call" of sound bytes to display which workshop participants are "here," are "present." The roll call reinforces the conflation between the critically ill Survival Workshop participants and the BTJ Company dancers. Clearly audible in the list are the names "Bill" and "Arnie," which reasserts Jones's connections with the workshop participants and his deceased partner. During this section, the large video screen upstage center also comes to life, displaying a still, extreme close-up of a young person's face. The image fades, but is immediately echoed in the music which begins, providing a backdrop for the subsequent dance sequence in which two of the dancers enact stylized versions of childhood friendship and play. From the image of the child on the screen to the stylized

⁶² This recalls Banes' description of the postmodern choreographer's interest in developing "language-like systems." See above, n 32.

movement of the dance, Jones makes explicit the connection between the videotaped material and the dance itself.

Throughout Still/Here, abstract notions of illness, death and dying recur in the images created by the dancers. In the childlike dance mentioned above, the partners continue their duet until one collapses, seeming to be suddenly stricken by some unseen peril. Her partner at first helps her to rise and dance again, but ultimately abandons the dancer who lies crumpled on the floor. The collapsed dancer strains to crawl across the stage, as her partner dances madly on. The sequence is haunted by the image of the young person pictured on the video screen at the beginning of the movement, and once again requires the audience to read the Survival Workshop over the presumably healthy dancer on stage. Although the dance image is in some measure abstract, the photograph, which documents the (real) young person stricken with a critical illness, makes lucid the meaning of the dance.

In another particularly striking moment, a dancer walking diagonally across the stage space is suddenly blindsided by another dancer who runs from the wings and seems to knock the first dancer to the floor. This movement is repeated many times throughout Still/Here, and is one clear example of the abstraction Jones expressly intends. In The New Yorker article by Henry Louis Gates published just before the piece opened, Jones explains that particular image: “People with a life-threatening illness have a joke – they call it the proverbial hit-by-a-truck scenario, because doctors apparently use that line frequently when informing them that they have a terminal illness. So we decided on the notion of being hit by something. And we tried tackling.”⁶³ Although none of this

⁶³ Gates, 122

textual explanation is included in the dance, the meaning of the movement is breathtakingly clear. The impact of watching an “unsuspecting” individual suddenly grounded by an unexpected blow compellingly communicates the emotional devastation of a life-threatening diagnosis.

Although most of Still/Here presents an abstract depiction of the life experiences of the Workshop participants, the piece also makes use of explicit biographical and autobiographical material. Long-time company member Larry Goldhuber is the only performer who speaks on-stage from a first-person point of view. Goldhuber’s mother participated in the New York City Survival Workshop and died of cancer before the work premiered. In performance, Goldhuber stands next to and then in front of a large video screen bearing a still image of his mother’s face. While the rest of the ensemble lines the sides of the stage, Goldhuber delivers a monologue describing his mother’s illness and death, occasionally performing his mother’s signature dance gesture. At certain moments, other members of the company approach and touch him in a supportive way. It is the most clearly personal and autobiographical section of the dance piece. It profusely confounds the real and the artistic, as Goldhuber discusses his personal loss and the company enacts (or, re-enacts?) the offering of their condolences.

There is an abrupt change in mood and style for “Here,” the second half of the program. This change is apparent right off with strikingly upbeat music and colors. The cool, blue lighting of “Still” is replaced with intense, vibrant, red light reinforced by red, orange, and rust-colored costumes. Five video monitors form an arching back wall to the set; they are used most often throughout the piece to display still video images of the faces of workshop participants. While “Still” is largely introspective and reflective, “Here” focuses in content and tone on the celebration of the life that remains in the

unhealthy body. The video and audio segments chosen for inclusion repeatedly affirm the life of the body, evoking the presence of the workshop participants, even those who may have already died. In his autobiography, Last Night on Earth, Jones says:

At the time of this writing easily one third of the eighty-four who participated in the survival workshops are no longer living. The question remains with each viewing of their portraits, each hearing of their recorded voices, Where is “here”? Where are they? Are they forever suspended in that four hours we spent together in a workshop studio, as I am consigned to this TV monitor?⁶⁴

Jones explicitly figures the videotaped representations as a medium by which individuals move through space and time, from the “there” of the workshop room to the “here” of the stage space. The real bodies of the performers on stage are held in constant tension with the real bodies of the workshop participants via the videotaped representations. This circuit of presence reflects back on itself; the performing dancers were no more present to the workshop participants than the survivors are present on stage.

In performance the video from the workshops is displayed on a series of large and small moving monitors throughout the dance. The images are highly-mediated. Gretchen Bender, the visual designer of the piece, made numerous artistic interventions to the tapes, including stop motion, frame-by-frame advance, extreme close-up, color and light distortion, and the multiple repetitions of images. In one section, for example, Bender employs multiple repetitions of a close-up, super slow-motion image of Jones smiling and putting his hand to his forehead, prompting Jones to comment: “Gretchen [Bender] has manipulated my movements so they are oddly unreal, of another time.”⁶⁵ The

⁶⁴ Jones, Last Night On Earth, 267.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Last Night On Earth, 266.

purposefully artistic style of the video, which in no way resembles the videotape commonly used in television news reports or TV documentaries, belies the puzzling insistence of some critics to read the videotapes as unmediated reality which would speak directly to the audience.⁶⁶

Many of the critics who responded to the piece (including Croce, who, again, had not seen the dance when she wrote about it) wrote about the video as if it provided some kind of unmediated access to the participants' real life experiences. Croce figures the taped segments as bits of unmediated suffering, even at one point claiming that videotape is "the preferred medium of victimhood."⁶⁷ In Croce's analysis, "victims" embrace and exploit videotape's potential to document their complaints and mistreatment at the hands of society. Inserting videotaped representations of marginalized individuals in a high art form like concert dance troubles the art/life binary Croce would reinforce. The binary opposition between art and life echoes Croce's concern over the distinctions between categories like form and content, modern and postmodern, high art and mass culture. "Discussing the Undiscussable," which appeared shortly after the premiere of Jones's work, reflects many of these underlying tensions.

Discussing the Undiscussable

Croce's article, published on December 26, 1994, evoked a puzzling array of vehement and venomous responses to Jones's well-publicized work. Croce's most

⁶⁶ Of course, even the videotape used in television news is highly edited and mediated. Their meaning is therefore highly constructed, not as it might seem, transparently conferred to the viewer.

⁶⁷ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," 55. All further references to this article are included in the text.

striking critical move in the essay was to review a work she had not seen. She argues that Jones's use of individuals who are "terminally ill and talk about it" puts the piece "beyond the reach of criticism" (54). Her only option, then, is to exclude herself from the performance to create a forum in which she can discuss the work: "[T]o write about what one has not seen becomes possible on strange occasions like Still/Here, from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre . . . I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about" (54-55). The title of her article, "Discussing the Undiscussable," emphasizes that not attending the piece was prerequisite for opening a space for criticism. She then uses this space to launch an attack on Still/Here, which she pejoratively categorizes as "victim art," and to bemoan the state of the arts in general.

Croce's major quarrel with the work is its "intentions." Jones has articulated the intentions of the piece as "to employ video's cool immortality . . . to capture the testimonies, images, and selected actions" of a group of people, and transform them into dance art for the stage.⁶⁸ Croce objects to the inclusion of this documentation of people who are really sick, not just acting or performing sickness. Elizabeth V. Spelman discusses the aesthetic representation of actual suffering at length in her book Fruits of Sorrow (1997). She contextualizes Croce's objections to Still/Here by pointing to ongoing concerns in art criticism about "the right distance for a work of art to strike between itself and the suffering it portrays," saying:

Too far, so one kind of worry goes, and the suffering of some becomes simply the occasion for the lovely aesthetic experience of others; but too close, so

⁶⁸ Jones, Last Night on Earth, 252.

another kind goes, and there is really not any art at all, but simply barely mediated suffering . . . Croce turns out to echo some of Plato's anxieties about the moral and political dangers facing what they both take to be unwary and insufficiently vigilant audiences exposed to representations of suffering in the theatre.⁶⁹

Spelman speaks to Croce's assumption that Jones's use of unhealthy people amounts to an exploitative presentation of unfortunate individuals: a freak show in the guise of artistic dance art. Croce would have us believe that her concern is both for the critically ill workshop participants, who are vulnerable to the self-serving artist, and for the audience, which is likely to be gulled into an inappropriate (read, sensation-driven) reaction to the events on stage, eschewing all formalist criteria.

Croce's definition of "victim art" is contingent upon Jones's choice to include material culled from the real world, not wholly invented by some mimetic gesture. She uses the term to describe art which uses real material to emphasize the artist's exclusion from normative discourses of health, wholeness, self-determinacy, and subjectivity. Put another way, any artist whose creative project seems bent on displaying his or her own lived inability to fully embody social norms is likely to be labeled a "victim artist." Croce's critical methodology exposes deep anxieties about the tension between art and life. She assumes that the real people Jones presents can only merit a real world response – sympathy – as opposed to a formalist analysis of the artistic merit of their status. Jones's refusal to recognize art and life as mutually exclusive categories troubles the parameters of dance as a high art form and criticism as the singular arbiter of "taste" and

⁶⁹ Elizabeth V. Spelman, Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Critical Attention to Suffering (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 11-12.

“imagination.”⁷⁰ Her warning about Jones’s misuse of real material ultimately speaks to a reactionary desire to maintain ideological boundaries between self and other.

Croce begins her piece by positioning herself decidedly outside of the Still/Here audience: “I have not seen Bill T. Jones’s Still/Here and have no plans to review it” (54). However, it readily becomes apparent that although she has not seen it, she absolutely intends to criticize it, often in the most derogatory terms. In the first column of her article, she equates Jones with Dr. Kevorkian, calls the piece “a messianic traveling medicine show,” and self-confidently claims that “no one goes to Still/Here for the dancing” (54). These are the opening volleys of the (unnecessarily overt) attack she launches in the article, and they foreshadow the language and tone she will use throughout the article to condemn Jones’s piece.

She justifies her decision to review a dance she has not seen on three grounds. First, the pre-production hype has made the work sufficiently known to her; seeing it is unnecessary because “the publicity has been deafening” (54). Secondly, she claims that the content of Still/Here explicitly excludes her and (by association) all critics from any reasonable and responsible stance in relation to the piece, which she claims is “unintelligible as theatre” (54). Finally, she assumes that her larger social agenda (to chastise and reform certain types of artistic endeavor) takes precedence over any critical misjudgments she might make in undertaking the description of a work she has not seen. Her express goal, after all, is to embarrass and frustrate the perpetrators of what she describes as victim art, and her strategy to accomplish this goal can be summed up in two words: “Don’t go” (54).

⁷⁰ See Spelman, 135.

According to Croce, Jones moves from the realm of dance art to the realm of victim art “by working dying people into his act” and by being one of those who “represent themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs” (54). She excuses the workshop participants (the “real” victims) and blames the artists who would co-opt their “victim” status for themselves. Croce’s explicitly accuses Jones of appropriating and exploiting the authentic “victim” status of the workshop participants: “They are the prime exhibits of a director-choreographer who has crossed the line between theatre and reality”(54). The authentic suffering (that is, victimhood) of the workshop participants has been corrupted, or made un-real, by its movement into the theatre space. The binary opposition between theatre and reality is crucial to Croce’s argument. By repeatedly traversing “the line” between theatre and reality, most explicitly via the videotaped representations of the workshops, Jones commits one of the grievous sins of the (always) self-indulgent victim-artists.

Importantly, her article implies that Jones’s HIV-positive status is by itself sufficient grounds for her to categorize the piece as victim art. Importantly, this category also includes “those dancers I’m forced to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disenfranchised homosexuals” (55). She explicitly cites identity politics as inappropriate material for artistic expression. The workshop participants, she says, “have no other choice other than to be sick,” while the “blacks,” “women,” and “homosexuals” seek falsely to don the mantle of “victimhood” (that is, move into the space reserved for real, authentic victims) and make of their appropriations “victim art.” In Croce’s estimation, artists who manipulate real material to advance their own political agenda are especially sinister. Jones’s public status (as an HIV-positive gay African-American man) is saturated with politicized identity meanings.

Although Jones isn't actually on the stage, Croce reads his identity as infusing the stage space.

Croce's discomfort with the unhealthy bodies Jones documents allows her to make a rather spurious connection between several quite distinct groups of people. While the express intent of "Discussing the Undiscussable" is to chastise Jones for "working dying people into his act," her invective against victim art dumps people of color, gay people, women, people with diseases, people who have been abused, and overweight people into the same critical category. Her bizarre argument, which purports to expose the distinctions between "real" victims and "phony" ones, ultimately creates a "victim" category which is so wide it threatens to envelope everyone who doesn't *quietly* conform to imaginary notions of the ideal (white, healthy, slender, even male?) human body. I would suggest that the key characteristic of this ideal individual is not actually race, or sexual preference, or gender – but quietness. To speak out against the totalizing imposition of this criteria – that is, to engage in the discourse of identity politics – is the ultimate affront to the pre-ordained cultural order.

Croce goes on to use her discussion of Still/Here to attack our national state of the arts. She asserts that the victim art phenomenon is a direct result of state and private funding practices which have privileged the socially useful over the purely aesthetic (56). She traces the history of the last twenty-five years of dance and dance funding to establish a causal relationship between the increased importance of social utility as a (the) criteria for judging art and the demise of what she calls "disinterested" art (56). Her article emanates a pointed and clearly personal nostalgia for the days when art apparently had no social obligations: "[W]hen I was on the National Endowment for the Arts panel, in the late seventies . . . art and art appreciation were unquestioned good things to support, and

'community outreach' had its own program" (56). Croce's remarks display a pronounced nostalgia for a time when, not only were she and her formalist cohorts running the show, but art was not held accountable to any social concern. Several critics have pointed out that this nostalgia for "disinterested" art is historically and politically suspect, as Steven Durland sarcastically intones, "After all, it took millennia to separate dance from its utilitarian, spiritual, and worship functions, and we don't want to backslide . . . To suggest that artists of the past were able to work oblivious to the public's utilitarian concerns is a fantasy."⁷¹ Croce finds it devastating that this (imagined) utopic moment has been consumed by a climate of politically motivated and socially active art: "By the late eighties, the ethos of community outreach has reached out and swallowed everything else" (56). She ultimately figures "disinterested" (purely aesthetic) art as the *victim* of this scenario; artists and funding bureaucracies which insist that art perform some socially useful function have destroyed art's sacrosanct irrelevance and derailed the appreciation of art's purely aesthetic formal qualities.

Croce's comments, while overtly incendiary in many ways, speak to an on-going discussion among dance critics about the nature of dance and the criteria for dance criticism. In her 1987 book Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics, Sondra Horton Fraleigh explores the relationship between the choreographer's individual personae and the universalizing impulse of much traditional dance criticism. In her introduction, Fraleigh reinforces the notion that dance offers the body as the idealized human instrument: "The body, understood in its lived totality, is the source of the dance aesthetic . . . All performing artists are embodied in their art, but the dance most clearly

⁷¹ Steven Durland, "Trash Talking the Arts," High Performance (Winter 1994), 11.

represents our expressive body-of-action and its aesthetic idealization.”⁷² Fraleigh claims that the dancer must represent not only the idealized body but also the essential human experience: “The art of dance draws upon both the personal and the universal body – tending, I believe, toward the latter . . . It is also true that the individual has been valued in dance (indeed, the existential context of modern dance has encouraged this) but still within the overarching, for-other, universalizing obligation of all art.”⁷³ Fraleigh’s interpretation points to an important contradiction between the idealized, conceptual dancer’s body and the specific, flawed, moribund body Jones would celebrate.⁷⁴

Fraleigh also takes on the subject of dance criticism and the criteria by which dance should be judged. Writing seven years before the Still/Here controversy erupted, she asserts that dance must strive first and foremost to transcend the personal. She offers specific requirements for the “good” dancer: “Good dancers know that the dancing self dies when it looks back either to visualize or to admire itself . . . They get caught up in a larger-than-self pursuit and transcend the egotism and narcissism of which dancers are often accused. The art of dance will tolerate neither trait”⁷⁵ Fraleigh implies that dancers (like Jones) who focus on their own politicized identity are guilty of a destructive “egotism” and “narcissism.” Fraleigh does not reject to the inclusion of personal material

⁷² Fraleigh, xvi.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷⁴ Her argument here echoes the rhetoric common in the feminist movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, which celebrated women’s bodies as the site of universal human experience. This line of thinking has both tremendous value and a host of theoretical and practical concerns. In Fraleigh’s argument, the dancer is asked to stand in for the universalized concept of “human being,” which seems to deny differences of race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc.

⁷⁵ Fraleigh, 23.

in dance as long as that material strives to exceed individual concerns. The real must always be used in the service of the universal. These critics reflect an essentializing impulse which asserts that dance must transcend the specific in favor of an appeal to common experiences and understandings.

Croce applies this criteria to Still/Here, which she assumes remains entirely relegated to the realm of the personal, unwilling to transform the individual experience of illness and dying into a transcendent work of art. She gives John Keats and Franz Schubert as examples of artists who manage to transform suffering into an art that recalls the universality of human experience, and condemns Still/Here as evidence of the way contemporary art has sacrificed a transcendent notion of the human spirit to the material concerns of individual politics: “We have also created an art with no power of transcendence, no way of assuring us that the grandeur of the individual spirit is more worth celebrating than the political clout of the group” (59). Croce uses Still/Here as an example of the kind of self-interested, politically motivated art that she believes threatens the quality of contemporary high art forms.

The Response

By criticizing a work she had not seen and articulating a brutal polemic against the state of dance in general, Croce inspired a host of artistic, cultural, and social responses. Many of these writers, as Roger Copeland notes, had themselves not seen Still/Here but felt authorized by Croce’s article to comment upon it anyway, as evidenced by Carol Martin’s comment, “I did not see Still/Here. But . . . Croce did not see it either.”⁷⁶ The

⁷⁶ Carol Martin, “High Critics/Low Arts,” in Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance ed. Gay Morris (London: Routledge, 1996), 321. Copeland’s remarks are in

reaction to Croce's essay was swift and dramatic. New York publications such as the Times and the Village Voice took on the subject immediately with rapidly penned responses by their respective experts on dance, theatre, and artistic criticism. The New Yorker added fuel to the fire a few weeks later by devoting its entire "In the Mail" section to responses to Croce's article, many of which had been solicited by The New Yorker editorial staff.⁷⁷ The respondents, such as Camille Paglia, bell hooks, Harvey Lichtenstein, and Tony Kushner, represent an appropriately diverse range of viewpoints and fall predictably on the side of the argument where one would expect them to, based on their political and/or identity orientation. Within a matter of weeks, practically everyone in the art world and many people outside of it as well were caught up in the discussion about real life material and postmodern dance.

Ironically, the widespread response to Croce's article eliminated her concern that dances like Still/Here leave no space for critical inquiry. Her own response, steeped, as it is, in her personal history, created a language, space, etiquette and community for response to the dance. The discussion was candid, powerful, and often rife with personal attack. Croce, of course, began this trend with her venomous personal censure of Jones. At times, her remarks border on what one colleague called the "unspeakably cruel."⁷⁸ For example, she heedlessly disrespects the memory of Arnie Zane in one strikingly clumsy attempt to enact an analogy: "Bill T. Jones seems to have been designated by his time to become the John the Baptist of victim art. (His Christ was Arnie Zane, who died of

"Not/There: Croce, Criticism, and the Culture Wars," Dance Theatre Journal (Summer 1995), 20.

⁷⁷ See "Who's the Victim?" The New Yorker, 30 January 1995, 10-13.

⁷⁸ Copeland, 16.

AIDS in 1988.)”⁷⁹ This kind of personal attack became the language of choice for these pieces. Croce came to her own defense on several occasions, continually re-asserting the line between the artist who creates and the critic who interprets. Several months after the controversy started, Croce was interviewed by Susie Linfield for Dance Ink, and claimed that she often finds herself “amazed that they [dancers] actually speak, and use words, and use them well.”⁸⁰ When Linfield steers the interview toward the issues raised in the victim art controversy, Croce bristles: “I know what you’re referring to, but I can’t stop and take all of this seriously. It seems infantile.” She goes on to refer to victim art as “pretentious garbage.”⁸¹ This exceedingly personal and bitter tone reflects the accepted rhetorical style for everyone engaged in the victim art debate.

As the debate flared, many critics joined Croce’s crusade and took up the case against victim art with an energy and animosity not common in concert dance discussions. In U.S. News and World Report, John Leo took it upon himself to attack the (victim) artists where they live: “The good news is that victim art has virtually no basis of popular support – it is totally dependent on grants from corporations, foundations and taxpayers. If the tap is cut off, it will have to produce its own audience, or better yet, just go under.”⁸² Leo’s analysis assumes that victim art is an elite artistic response to various

⁷⁹ Croce, “Discussing the Undiscussable,” 60. Many left-leaning respondents to “Discussing the Undiscussable” accused Croce of both racism and homophobia based on remarks such as this one. Many others from both sides of the discussion were quick to defend Croce’s ethical standing. While I do not wish to become enmeshed in the personal mud-slinging of the discussion, I do feel compelled to point out that Croce’s remark, in this case, would have been nearly unthinkable, and certainly un-printable, had it referred to the untimely death of one partner in a heterosexual marriage.

⁸⁰ Linfield, 22.

⁸¹ Linfield, 24.

⁸² John Leo, “The Backlash Against Victim Art,” U.S. News And World Report, 16 January 1995, 22.

far left causes which have no base of popular support. He further assumes that the imminent demise of politically interested art is “good news” for the national artistic outlook. Hilton Kramer’s response (predictably) echoes this sentiment, claiming that Croce’s article, “has dared to tell the truth about the artistic blight that this political orthodoxy has brought us, and to awaken the magazine’s liberal readers to the consequences of their folly in embracing it.”⁸³ Terry Teachout applauds Croce for “speaking out against the poisonous amalgam of self-pity and self-righteousness that is victim art.”⁸⁴ The vehemence with which so many traditional cultural critics enjoined the victim art debate discloses the extent to which these critics felt threatened by the disruptive potential of identity politics. Jones’s work, which provided evidence of the marginalized individuals these critics would silence, elicited an often hostile response.

Sometimes, though, the debate produced writing that was more dismissive and flip than outraged. Many of the articles focused on Croce’s flawed methodology in assuming she could comprehend a work she had not seen. In his long article on victim art in Dance Theatre Journal, Copeland agrees with many of Croce’s principles, but proceeds to take sarcastic shots at her methodology all throughout the essay: “[T]he gap between Croce’s preconceptions about Still/Here and what actually transpires on the stage is, shall we say, wide with a capital W. It’s as if she had distantly overheard a conversation about Rimbaud, mistaken it for an exchange about Rambo, and then proceeded to expostulate at great length about Sylvester Stallone’s performance.”⁸⁵ Emma Manning wrote in Dance Australia: “[W]ith due respect, had Croce troubled to sit through Still/Here, she would

⁸³ Hilton Kramer, “Who’s the Victim,” The New Yorker, 30 January 1995, 12.

⁸⁴ Terry Teachout, “Victim Art,” Commentary 99, no. 3 (March 1995), 61.

⁸⁵ Copeland, 15.

have observed that far from a stage of people about to snuff it, the work focuses on a troupe of able bodied dancers who do dance.”⁸⁶ The informal language of this debate is quite different from the usual polite and disinterested discussion of high culture events like concert dance.

The debate was unusual because of the high level of energy that it provoked, which was manifest in the writers’ language and tone and in the enormous amount of coverage that the piece received. As in the controversy over the NEA Four, Jones’s reliance on real material allowed conservative cultural critics to assume the meaning of the work resided solely in the bits of documentary video he presented on stage. These assumptions rely on the notion the meaning of reality is itself self-evident. As Croce had predicted, the use of real sick people made formal art criticism seem superfluous. The real material used in Still/Here disrupted traditional circuits of authority and meaning-making. Ironically, Croce’s attempt to restore the place and power of the critic in relation to the work of art catapulted concert dance and dance writing into the national spotlight, and blew the circuit of authority wide open.

Dirty Dancing

I return, then, to the series of questions articulated at the outset of this chapter: questions about the validity of and critical authority over art which mixes high and popular forms; about the tension over strict genre boundaries in formalist art and the specific role of video as a contemporary foil to such ideals; about the role identity politics can play in productive disruptions of artistic endeavor (and vice-versa); and about the

⁸⁶ Emma Manning, “From the Heart,” Dance Australia, October/November 1995, 17.

relationship of the audience to the unmediated work of art. I want to briefly pursue each of these questions. The Croce/Jones controversy laid bare the tension between those artists who would employ any means necessary (multimedia collaboration, real-life sources, explicit social content) to expand the parameters of concert dance and those critics whose first priority is maintaining the legitimacy of dance as a high art form. Sally Banes cites Jones, Meredith Monk and Merce Cunningham as the three choreographers who have played the biggest role in simultaneously celebrating high and popular forms, or what she calls “bringing ‘dirty dancing’ into the pristine cathedral of culture”⁸⁷ In the end, this “sullyng” of the high art genre of serious concert dance with the gritty, material evidence of identity politics may have been Jones’s greatest sin against the traditional establishment. The mixture of high and popular forms which Jones’s art encourages raises important questions about who is authorized to make, see, and criticize dance art.

This conflict rehearses an on-going debate between the advocates of formalist art and the postmodern sensibility which had become prevalent by the time “Discussing the Undiscussable” appeared. Banes attributes the influx of popular forms into concert dance to the postmodern aesthetic, claiming that postmodern choreographers draw “their inspiration from popular entertainments and social dancing, from the fashion industry and the art world, and from the garish colors, shapes, and sounds of punk rock, new wave, and street styles.”⁸⁸ In her article “High Critics/Low Arts,” Carol Martin explicitly figures the victim art controversy as a conflict between two diverse attitudes about the mixture of

⁸⁷ Sally Banes, “Dancing in the Museum: The Impure Art,” in *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones*, ed. Pamela Johnson and Kathleen McLean (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 1998), 15.

⁸⁸ Banes, *Writing Dancing*, 254.

high and popular forms, adding, “In the debate over high and low culture, it is well known that modernist critics were antagonistic to low culture, especially in its form as a burgeoning mass culture industry.”⁸⁹ Martin’s remarks point again to the binary opposition between high and low culture which is necessary for high cultural forms to exist. Traditional formalist critics saw the profusion of mass culture as a dangerous attack on the aesthetic ideals central to elite cultural forms.

In Highbrow/Lowbrow, Lawrence Levine traces the development of various American high culture forms through the nineteenth century. He suggests that two important features of a cultural hierarchy are rigidly defined genre categories and a critical sense of nostalgia for a previous, presumably more “pure” artistic era: “There is the same sense of the absolute qualitative distinctiveness of cultural genres, which makes cultural degeneration easy to spot . . . There is the same sense that culture is less something that *is* than something that *was*.”⁹⁰ Levine succinctly describes the alarm and dismay which many cultural critics feel when their respective genre categories are troubled by the incursion of popular material and/or a mass audience: “We have in recent decades begun to move gradually but decisively away from the rigid, class-bound definitions of culture forged at the close of the nineteenth century. The contemporary debate is a reaction – often an extremely angry one – to this development.”⁹¹ Levine suggests that the postmodern disintegration of clearly defined social and aesthetic categories evokes a high level of contentious critical concern.

⁸⁹ C. Martin, 320, 325.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 251. Emphasis in original.

⁹¹ Levine, 255.

Levine's comments prefigure the Croce/Jones controversy, with its attendant anxiety over the mixing of art and life. Ultimately, the controversy figures high art as the realm of formalist, transcendent, disinterested production, and opposes it to the mass cultural forms which it assumes are utilitarian, personal, and political. The use of real material is one important strategy by which certain artists have sought to trouble the traditional boundaries of high art. Real material, specifically as it marks the lives and bodies of those usually excluded from mainstream thought and culture, evokes the specific, the material, and the personal. It does not rely on formal aesthetic categories or advanced artistic training to communicate its meaning. As such, it seems to offer an easy way to infuse high cultural forms with popular and readable significance.

There is little doubt of Croce's specific disdain for the incursion of the popular in high art, which Theodores characterizes as her "strong bias against popular culture and mass audiences."⁹² Croce rejects the mass audience and any dancer or company which earns one. In 1974, for example, Croce wrote a scathingly negative review of the Joffrey Ballet entitled "How to Be Very, Very Popular," proposing that the Joffrey gets away with producing dance which is mediocre at best by pandering to a mass audience.⁹³ She asserts that when the Joffrey audience receives a dance "with rapture," one cannot credit their response, as "You practically have to fall down for most people to notice anything wrong" (84). She faults the Joffrey because it hasn't "trained its audience to see stylistic faults any better than it has trained the majority of its dancers to correct them" (84). Croce, who takes her own role as audience educator very seriously, disdains the mass

⁹² Theodores, 125.

⁹³ Croce, "How to Be Very, Very Popular," in *Afterimages*, 82-92. All subsequent references to this review are in the text.

audience for their lack of technical knowledge and respect for her formalist artistic criteria. Her ultimate accusation is that the Joffrey presents ballets that “serve the audience better than they do the dancers” (85).

Croce could not help but suspect any dance produced by an artist as popular as Jones. One of the things Croce seems to object to the most vehemently is the amount of publicity that Jones received in the months prior to the premiere of Still/Here. This effect of this popularity is not lost on Jones, who has commented “I don’t know of anyone right now who gets written about more than I.”⁹⁴ Tony Kushner attributes Croce’s objections to a fear of Jones’s popular appeal: “[His] work sells out at BAM because people love it; it moves and infuriates and excites them, and this, I think, makes Arlene Croce jealous, or makes her, as a reactionary, feel threatened.”⁹⁵ Croce, who detests the “deafening” publicity prior to Still/Here, is determined to properly educate the audience as to the danger of popular art. Dance critics like Croce seem to feel they have a sacred duty to protect and uphold the standards and respectability of an art form that – being based on the somewhat silly notion of the moving human body – is always already generally suspect. In this configuration, dance is in need of protection from both politically motivated artists like Jones and unqualified audiences.

Randy Martin figures this as symptomatic of the vexed relationship between postmodern style and high art, and emphasizes the anti-formalist interest in real social situations: “This condition of the social ‘bursting into’ the halls of modern concert dance signals dance’s resistive postmodern turn, and it is the agency of those dancers who have most self-consciously taken on this transgressive move as their own that constitutes its

⁹⁴ Quoted in Gates, 123.

⁹⁵ Tony Kushner, “Who’s the Victim,” The New Yorker, 30 January 1995, 11.

politics.”⁹⁶ Banes sees the proliferation of identity politics as part and parcel of the postmodern aesthetic for Jones and other similar choreographers: “Their work is equally informed by their postmodern dance heritage and their political identities. That is, they see their affiliation with political groups as a radical engagement that impinges on and disrupts their art form’s discursive practices.”⁹⁷ Postmodern artists and critics investigate the social relevance and political efficacy of their art, often by relying on strategies which link their art with the real world. This leads them to embrace a variety of alternative identities, identities substantiated by the evidence Jones and artists like him present, which in turn threaten the social standing of the conservative cultural critics.

Those who reject identity politics as appropriate artistic material often assume that “identity” is code for “minority,” refusing to acknowledge the socially-constructed aspects of all identity positions. The most common understanding of minority in this dialogue is not “unhealthy,” as it might seem, but “black” and “gay.” Thus one can find numerous examples of traditional critics rejecting particular identity politics, such as Jennifer Dunning’s call in the New York Times for dances which are not threatened by “needless political baggage. On the subject of such baggage, a moratorium might be called on pieces dealing with growing up gay – eloquent though some of them may be. And drag has become a drag.”⁹⁸ Dunning does not presume that “traditional” coming-of-age stories have been overdone – she is only tired of those which explicitly express gay sexuality. Similarly, autobiography as a form remains as popular, even more popular than

⁹⁶ Randy Martin, Critical Moves, 82.

⁹⁷ Banes, Writing Dancing, 327.

⁹⁸ Jennifer Dunning, “Glancing Backwards with an Eye Toward the Future,” New York Times, 6 September 1992, H17.

ever, and does not upset traditional critical criteria. Discussing Jones's work, Albright explains that traditional critics are troubled only by those autobiographies which function as an "act of community," as an evocation of a particular (in her example, African-American) experience which cannot be reconciled with the idealized liberal humanist subject: "Giving testimony and bearing witness by recounting ones' life experiences has helped marginalized communities hold onto the experience of their own bodies while reclaiming their history."⁹⁹

Jones is overtly interested in re-defining the relationship between art and life, often by acknowledging and complicating the relationship between performer and audience. His effort to introduce real material in formalist compositions represents both impulses: "In displaying the real, Jones seems to be insisting on a connection between those on one side of the proscenium with those on the other."¹⁰⁰ By creating a dance which celebrates the life of the unhealthy body, Jones implicates the audience in a particularly threatening way. He is, on some level, aware of this, and describes Still/Here by saying, "Everyone in the audience is symptomatic – no one gets out of here alive."¹⁰¹ This bold attempt to metaphorically entangle the audience in the critical illnesses portrayed on the stage partially explains Croce's sense of umbrage. In addition, the popular (and admittedly sentimental) appeal of Still/Here played an important role in propelling the BTJ/AZ Dance Company into the national imagination, thus exposing it to an even broader mass audience, as Jones admits: "Still/Here expanded our audience

⁹⁹ Albright, 149.

¹⁰⁰ C. Martin, 332.

¹⁰¹ Jann Parry, "Bill T. Jones's Still/Here," Dance Theatre Journal 12, no. 1 (Summer 1995), 22.

considerably. The scope of the work and the subject matter made many more people feel safe in coming to see it.”¹⁰² Ironically, the work’s manifest association with the real life experiences of unhealthy individuals simultaneously attracted a popular audience and repelled traditional critics. This is not unexpected in a work which so consciously transgresses the divide between high and low culture.

Banes compellingly summarizes the implications of these radical changes in contemporary dance: “Because postmodern choreography has radically redefined dance, our traditional theories for categorizing what we see on stage have crumbled . . . perhaps the most salutary features of the breakdown of boundaries characterizing postmodernism in the arts is a certain freedom.”¹⁰³ It is ultimately this freedom which vexes Croce and her ilk. Freed from the strict confines of formalist art, artists and audiences alike move to radically reconfigure the concert dance experience. The popularity of Jones’s work indicate that Croce’s attempts to restore order in the art-audience relationship may prove futile. The direct audience appeal of postmodern forms, an appeal based to some extent on the artist’s self-conscious insistence to look back at the audience, frustrates the traditional critic’s attempt to shore up the “crumbling” categories of artistic endeavor. Bill T. Jones has consistently created art which attempts to expand traditional notions of art, of life, of the body. Few contemporary artists have more successfully or seductively teased out these complicated and difficult issues.

¹⁰² Quoted in Golden, 133.

¹⁰³ Banes, Writing Dancing, 258

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION:

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The corps(e) of the Real - if there is any - has not been recovered, is nowhere to be found. And this is because the Real is not just dead (as God is), it has purely and simply disappeared.

– Jean Baudrillard, The Vital Illusion

Baudrillard's assertion that "the Real" has disappeared speaks to an important paradox of this contemporary moment: the proliferation of reality-based cultural forms at a moment when postmodernism claims that "the real is no longer what it used to be." However, Baudrillard realizes that both circumstances are actually symptoms of a postmodern reconsideration of the nature of reality, a reconsideration which results from the rejection of master narratives of truth and experience. This in turn inspires a deep cultural longing for authentic experience: "We seem to be driven by a huge and irresistible compulsion that acts on us through the very progress of our technologies . . . a compulsion to draw ever closer to the unconditional realization of the real."¹ Artists, writers, and television executives feed this compulsion by producing an ever-increasing array of cultural forms which claim to afford transparent access to reality. Over exposure to these reproductions of reality is ironically what leads to its dissolution: "Let us be clear about this: if the Real is disappearing, it is not because of a lack of it – on the

¹ Jean Baudrillard, The Vital Illusion, ed. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 65.

contrary, there is too much of it.”² Multiple and competing versions of reality make of each (willing or unwilling) consumer of mass media a referee of the relative authenticity of the image.

Baudrillard’s discussion of the contemporary cultural fascination with and suspicion about “the real” speaks compellingly to the artists I have addressed. The performance events this dissertation has discussed all emphatically reassert their connection to reality. The performance artists defunded by the NEA all celebrated their material bodies and life experiences. Anna Deavere Smith found the detailed reproduction of “found” human speech the best means to address the complicated social “truths” of our times. And Bill T. Jones believed that the incorporation of movement by and images of real-live ill people would augment the authenticity of Still/Here. Furthermore, the examples I have chosen are just a few of the many contemporary theatre works which manifest an interest in material from the real world. Performance artists continue to draw on autobiographical material, documentary dramas continue to be produced, and contemporary choreographers use text and other found material to make dance with a tacit connection to real life. Reality, it seems, is everywhere in contemporary performance. By reexamining some of the salient features of these performances, I hope to draw out some conclusions about their vexed relationship to reality.

One important common feature of these artists is their committed belief that theatre art should address the political realities of contemporary society. Tellingly, all of the theatre artists on which I have focused make politically interested art. They have all

² Ibid.

chosen forms which lend themselves to social dissent and artistic disruption. As we have seen, performance art, documentary drama, and even postmodern dance are all genre categories which often challenge the political and artistic status quo. There are other performance options which would not so easily accommodate overt social comment: Holly Hughes could have pursued stand-up comedy, Smith could write mainstream realist plays, and Jones could create classical ballet or even high modernist concert dance. Instead, these artists work in performance contexts that support their social and political agendas. Their attempts to draw attention to the manifold oppressions and contradictions of contemporary society are grounded in their belief that art has the capacity to effect real world change.

Therefore, their decision to use real material arises from the desire to reinforce the connection between their art and the social conditions of real life. Ironically, as we have seen, their abiding faith in the political efficacy of real material can sometimes undermine their progressive intentions. In each case examined so far, the real material used by the artist became the focus of much critical interest and anxiety. Eventually, conservative cultural critics were able to use the presence of “the real” to devalue the artist’s work and demean their message. Concern over the presence of real material becomes a pretext for continuing to silence and depreciate the voices, experiences, and interests of the socially disenfranchised. The traditional critical community uses the supposed transparency of real material to relegate the artists to non-art status and confine the readings of their works to forms (pornography, journalism, social work) which more comfortably accommodate their non-traditional identities.

By activating the familiar tropes of mediatized reality, the artists under discussion thus imperil their own live performance practice. The troubled relationship between live performance and media representations has been discussed at length by Philip Auslander, who notes that much contemporary live performance, forced into competition with other mediatized cultural modes, has opted to simultaneously emulate and denigrate mass media forms:

To put it bluntly, the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible . . . This situation has created an understandable anxiety for those who value live performance, and this anxiety may be at the root of their need to say that live performance has a worth that both transcends and resists market value.³

Auslander points out that contemporary live performance vacillates between a neurotic desire to co-opt the methods and meanings of contemporary mediatized performance and a self-serving celebration of the essential value of presence evoked by a live event.

Karen Finley, for example, provides an apt example of this phenomenon when she describes her goals in performance: “I still want to show that art is scary, and that large corporations can’t buy us, but we still have an effect on culture. Music does that, and I have a great advantage in that I perform live.”⁴ Finley suggests that her “live”

³ Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

⁴ Karen Finley quoted in Margot Mifflin, “The Shock of the Real: An Interview with Karen Finley,” in The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena, ed. Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (Gardiner, NY: Critical Press, 1998), 73.

performance resists mediatization and capitalist reproduction, but simultaneously claims she wants to emulate music, a form which invites the exact corporate processes she would resist. Auslander suggests that many artists and critics misinterpret the ontology of performance by refusing to acknowledge its always mediatized status in contemporary culture.

Of particular importance to my study is Auslander's discussion of the relationship between avant-garde performance and our media-saturated culture. Auslander suggests that specific avant-garde performance practices, including some previously cited in my case studies, have had a profound effect on the ultimate "mediatization" of live performance: "The incursion of mediatization into the live setting . . . is currently manifest not only in the presence of video in much performance art, but also in the kind of [non-matrixed] performing characteristic of the avant-garde . . . In effect, the performance avant-garde had absorbed the phenomenology of mediatized performance even before it took up a position within the economy of repetition."⁵ Ultimately, Auslander bluntly argues that in the struggle between live and mediated performances, live performance stands very little chance of usurping the cultural value of the mediatized.⁶

Auslander proposes that to some extent avant-garde performance is always already mediatized. This fact is overlooked by most of the artists and the critics who engaged in the various debates I have covered. Artists and critics alike at times rely on the imaginary power of real material to communicate transparently with the audience.

⁵ Auslander, 28, 30.

⁶ Auslander, 1.

This facilitates the reinforcement of a too-facile art-life binary. Artists who tread in material from the “real life” side of the opposition risk the effacement of their entire aesthetic project.

Perhaps, then, the risk that these artists face is not that critics and audiences will be unable to account for their use of real material, but that the real material makes their performances seem too familiar. As has often been remarked, contemporary culture is saturated with the mediatized image of reality, including advertisements and film, but most important to this study, television. The use of real material in contemporary performance pales in comparison to the prevalence of reality-based programming on television. These trends in television speak to the issues raised by the performances discussed in this project. To understand the broader social context of the events already under consideration, it is useful to explore the popular response to recent television phenomena which trade in many of the same concepts employed by the NEA Four, Anna Deavere Smith, and Bill T. Jones. By exploring this context, I hope to illuminate the similarities, and more importantly the differences, between these two distinct modes of cultural production.

In recent years television itself has shown a pronounced preoccupation with “the Real.” The proliferation and expansion of television news coverage (how many cable news channels are there now?) is but one indication of this phenomenon. In addition to tv journalism’s promise to continually and immediately broadcast the latest information from and images of reality, other program formats, from talk shows to game shows to dramas, display an ever-increasing emphasis on the real. Even the hour-long fictional tv drama, one of the mainstays of television programming, has recently demonstrated an

expanding interest in representing reality; Law and Order (NBC) continually draws its plots from real life crimes, and NYPD Blue (ABC) adopts the hand-held camera of cinema verité to trade in documentary aesthetics. To maintain some sense of stability and reduce the relativist nausea this postmodern spin produces, consuming subjects rely on broad ontological categories to make sense of their world. All the various kinds of images of reality which television can produce must be relegated to an appropriate category to be readable. DNA results on a talk show, a quorum call on the floor of the Senate, or a police officer wrestling a resistant suspect to the pavement are intelligible (and ultimately unthreatening) because of their easy reinscription in previously delineated (and repeatedly broadcast) realities. Whether we like it or not, we have all become experts at evaluating various representations of reality, and we make judgments about these competing versions which conform to our own ideological presuppositions about the nature of experience.

It is both tempting and dangerous to raise questions about tv in a study primarily concerned with performance. TV is seductive. Its popularity makes it the most accessible and ubiquitous example available to the cultural critic. In addition, it seems, on the surface, to have much in common with the theatre. The language of tv is replete with theatrical tropes; there are actors, directors, producers, dramas, comedies, characters, performances, even plays.⁷ The fact that television often raids theatre writings and productions for broadcast material furthers the assumption that the two forms are, if not interchangeable, at least analogous. These assumptions, however, are

⁷ Auslander discusses this phenomenon at length in the second chapter of Liveness.

wrong. There is a world of difference between theatre and television, the living presence of the artist being the most obvious and fundamental distinction. Television, for all its promise of reality and consistent effort to present images of everyday life, completely avoids the real human body. No “real” person, no “real” body, is ever actually present, no matter how transparent the dramas, comedies, or reality shows attempt to be. Television is a world of images, of representations of bodies made up of points of light, eschewing all actual connection with the physical. While it would be erroneous to assume that real material works in television the same way it works on stage, it would be equally inaccurate to deny the broader cultural context of a widespread interest in real material. The cultural fascination with reality-based tv programs manifests this interest, and effects the way audiences and critics make meaning of the performances. A brief foray into the production and reception of reality tv can clarify both the cultural context for reality-based performance and the unique potential of performance in the postmodern world.

Reality TV

Reality tv is, indeed, extremely popular in this early part of the twenty-first century. Television has always made much of its ability to re-present real life, especially as television news makes broadcast material out of the events of the day. Since the early 1990’s, there has been an increasing emphasis on shows which exploit the pervasive ease of video technology to create entertainment programs based on unrehearsed events. These shows range from talk shows to America’s Funniest Home Videos (ABC) to MTV’s extremely popular unrehearsed soap opera, The Real World. Of particular

interest here are those shows which purport to give viewers unmediated access to the real life events of a particular profession: shows like C*O*P*S (Fox) and Life in the ER (TLC). Indeed, the cable channel TLC has devised a whole network of programming based on the documentation and recording of events in the lives of “ordinary,” real people, including their traditional heterosexual family values trilogy, Blind Date, A Wedding Story, and A Baby Story. The benign impulse of the TLC programming is offset by the numerous reality-based shows which present society at its worst. These shows, including America’s Most Wanted (syndicated by Twentieth-Century Fox), America’s Stupidest Criminals (Fox), and the various trash talk shows (Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake come to mind), focus on the squalid, painful, and morally suspect details of human interaction. The main currency of these shows is the assumption that tv can provide unmediated access to lives and the experiences of real people and can subsequently have an effect on the real world.

In the summer of 2000, CBS stumbled upon what was arguably the cultural phenomenon of the year with its surprise hit Survivor!. Although Survivor! is, for all intents and purposes, a game show, with as spurious a claim to reality as game shows have, its central conceit (the contestants are “abandoned” in some isolated location and deprived of food and other basic necessities) and televisual style (the contestants submit to having their actions recorded twenty-four hours a day, cinema verité style) position it firmly within the discourse of reality tv. Its phenomenal success encouraged a spate of reality-based clones in the following tv season, including Big Brother (CBS), The Mole (ABC), and Temptation Island (Fox). All of these shows exploit both the idea that the events being presented are unmediated and the public’s voyeuristic fascination with the

seamier side of human nature. I would like to briefly explore some of the mainstream media coverage of Survivor! to provide a counterpoint to the performance criticism described in previous chapters.

Survivor! and the reality shows that have sprung up in its wake have generated several different kinds of mainstream media coverage. First, the producers of the shows themselves generate a great deal of uncritical public relations material. This can include everything from press releases to personal appearances by the stars of these shows, often on other more traditional reality-based TV programs like the morning news or late night talk shows. These corporate-generated events have a capitalist interest in at all times reasserting the reality of the material that has been broadcast. CBS, for example, has made celebrities of each Survivor! contestant by blanketing their broadcast day with interviews and featurettes on the individual, their experiences on the show, and their “real lives” back in the States.

Also, there is a good deal of negative press coverage which sees the shows and/or the behavior in them as indication of the general social and cultural decline of our national character. While I assume that anyone who consumes any television at all has had his or her fill of the corporate-generated celebrations of Survivor!, I would like to give a few brief examples from the print coverage of Survivor! to illustrate the press’s ambivalence about the reality TV phenomenon. While much of this coverage suggests that the success of reality TV portends the end of human civilization, some finds a way to question the show’s social agenda while simultaneously praising its ability to teach us, the viewing audience, something about ourselves or our society.

For example, one television and popular media critic speaks glowingly of Survivor! not necessarily because the show itself is so good, but because he believes it holds great potential for future TV programming: “Though the format will be adapted by a wide array of specious programs, it may also eventually develop as a major contribution to the American dramatic tradition. Never has any dramatic medium managed to mix artifice and improvisation in quite the same way.”⁸ Other articles about the trend suggest that reality TV actually provides a positive social function by keeping a close eye on individual subjects and making them feel accountable to society at large for their actions: “By publicizing the government’s effort to fight crime, they help deter it, as well as strengthening public confidence in the police. They also deter improper behavior by the police themselves.”⁹ This bizarre logic assumes that we would all be better off in a world where surveillance does not only record the subject’s everyday life but is a primary motivator of behavior, evoking Foucault’s imagery of the prisoner (our society) held in the thrall of the panopticon. For some conservative cultural critics, these programs represent a positive social phenomenon.

However, the vast majority of articles published about Survivor! (and about reality television in general) offer a negative assessment of the show and its impact on the moral character of the United States. Many articles complain about the lack of artistic creativity and aesthetic development these shows require and foster. For example, one magazine columnist comments in response to the reality show-filled fall TV lineup: “If

⁸ Robert Thompson, “Voyeurism and TV: A Natural Match,” Multichannel News, 16 October 2000, 47.

⁹ “You’re Under Arrest, and on TV,” The Economist, 27 March 1999, 28.

what is in the works is the best the Hollywood creative community can do, let us declare emphatically that it has run out of gas.”¹⁰ Others propose that the shows represent a dangerous threat to the national imagination, describing the shows’ emphasis on the malevolence of human nature as “designed to increase our level of paranoia . . . If programmers are right in thinking that this is the hot item of the decade, one can only hope that this will be a fast decade.”¹¹ Newsweek published a snide article pointing out the potential for reality tv to devolve into boring non-events when participants refuse to go along with the rules of their respective programs.¹² Many authors point out the trivial and ultimately uninteresting nature of the content of these shows: “As in real life, most of the tension . . . is over small nit-picky things like who is snoring, who is drinking all the cola and who is attracted to who. Not really the stuff of great programming, but reality.”¹³ Such comments point to the widely held opinion that in spite of their popularity, these are not, as it were, “good” shows; they often fail to provide the facile conflict and resolutions which fuel traditional tv fare. This argument assumes that the shows are unsatisfying because the present unmediated, unorganized reality. It reflects a desire for conventional narrative structure similar to that which fueled some of the criticisms of the theatre art works previously described.

¹⁰ L. Brent Bozell. “Survivor! Success Sparks Trash TV’s Race to the Bottom,” Insight on the News, 2 October 2000, 46.

¹¹ Peter Bart, “Surreal ‘Reality,’” Variety, 9 October 2000, 4.

¹² Anna Kuchment and Malcolm Beith, “A Dose of Reality,” Newsweek, 29 January 2001, 4.

¹³ Lou Ann Thomas, “Boring Lives Lead to Reality TV Shows,” Topeka Capital-Journal, 3 August 2000, 7.

More prevalent than criticisms of Survivor! as a television program are concerns about the society it supposedly reflects and influences. In these articles, there is often an inherent confusion between criticisms of television and criticisms of society, in most cases the two being understood as interchangeable. Many writers echo James Martin's sentiment that "[I]t is difficult to watch these shows and not feel either revulsion or a sense of sadness that this is where our culture has arrived."¹⁴ Columnist Ziauddin Sardar's article in New Statesman typifies the tendency to gloss over any differences between reality television and reality itself. Sardar parses Sartre's proclamation that "Hell is other people," by claiming that in the contemporary reality tv, "There is no escape from other people determined to show just how hellish they really are . . . Everywhere, they demonstrate how banal and dumbfounding they are, how unthinking and how willing to be manipulated for deplorable ends." In his configuration, it is impossible to tell if he is referring to the participants of reality tv shows or everyone in contemporary society. Tellingly, he subsequently blames this "return to ancient amorality" on what he calls "two very postmodern traits": the all-consuming desire for media attention and a prevalent "narcissistic individualism" which "has turned hedonism into a fashion statement."¹⁵ Sardar places the blame for this no-holds-barred quest for personal pleasure on the postmodern condition. He assumes that postmodernism supports an emphasis on the self, which he obviously disdains for its relativist moral implications, tangling up postmodernism, popular culture, and ethical relativism into one reactionary horror.

¹⁴ James Martin, "Coarse TV," America, 16 September 2000, 30.

¹⁵ Ziauddin Sardar, "The Rise of the Voyeur," New Statesman, 6 November 2000, 25.

Sardar goes on to equate today's reality tv audience with the bloodthirsty crowd of the Roman coliseum: "We have returned with a vengeance to Roman circuses. We are no better than the barbarians who watched and bayed for blood as the victims were fed to the lions."¹⁶ His evocation of the ultimate popular entertainment extravaganza, the Roman circus, exposes his underlying concern about the appeal of reality to the mass audience. Again, as in the victim art controversy, the expressed anxiety over real material reveals a certain discomfort with the popular audience. Critics who disdain the current trends in reality tv often comment on the class distinctions of the participants and audiences for the programs. Sardar describes the guests on daytime talk shows as a parade of "freaks, deviants, . . . sad losers [and] home grown rubbish."¹⁷ Often, these writers imply that the behavior displayed on reality tv indicates a lower class lack of politeness, ethics, and social grace: "In short, there seemed to be a complete lack of shame in the men and women who spent 39 days on Pulau Tiga . . . Again, what is new is not the mindless pursuit of sex, money, and power, but the almost total lack of scruples about doing so."¹⁸ These critics figure the participants and audiences of these shows as lower class and show how their defects inform the general moral decay of society.

The most significant differences between reality-based performance and reality tv have to do with the political objectives of the producers. Unlike the artists I have examined, reality tv in and of itself does not seek to subvert the conservative capitalist organization of contemporary society in any way. In fact, most network reality tv shows

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sardar, 25.

¹⁸ J. Martin, 30.

tend to be reactionary in their impulse. Survivor! for example repeatedly evokes the “may the best man win” ethic of social Darwinism which assumes that capitalist scarcity dictates human behavior. Even when the programs present individuals whose identities and/or behavior fall outside of conventional social norms, these people are often subject to hostility from the audience and/or the other more traditional characters. Programs like The Real World and Jerry Springer, which may at first seem to offer an array of alternative social practices and life choices, ultimately reinscribe conventional values by structuring episodes to highlight audience aversion to non-traditional behavior.

The dismayed critical responses to these shows often betray an obvious conservative slant.¹⁹ In addition to the general anxiety about the behaviors displayed on the shows, many critics argue that any society which supports such programming must be deeply flawed. For example, Robert Sheppard proposes that the appeal of reality tv stems from a lack of genuine affection in the nuclear family: “Reality shows become a way to experience real emotions vicariously. And for a generation that has grown up with television as a trusted baby-sitter there is no fear of the medium.”²⁰ The author’s strategy proposes that the presumably dangerous cultural attraction to reality television is the result of a generation’s worth of bad parenting. An article published by the American Family Association is less subtle about who is to blame for the popularity of shows like Fox’s Temptation Island, suggesting that the contestants and audience “are members of the generation that grew up in the highly sexualized TV landscape of the 1980’s. In fact,

¹⁹ There is, of course, no critical objection to shows like America’s Funniest Home Videos and TLC’s The Wedding Story which reinforce hegemonic notions of the (heterosexual, middle class, usually white) American family.

²⁰ Robert Sheppard, “Peeping Tom Television,” Maclean’s, 10 April 2000, 58.

if one were to subtract about 15 years from the participants' ages, it would drop them right in front of the TV for shows like Kate and Allie, Who's the Boss, [and] Cagney and Lacey."²¹ The author constructs a list of earlier tv shows which have led to the current reality tv "crisis." Tellingly, all of these shows question traditional gender roles and present women working outside of the home and/or living in non-traditional arrangements. Here again, the writers conflate the fictional tv characters with the (real) working mothers who supposedly let the tv raise their children, thus confusing the material conditions of real life with the constructed "reality" of tv programming.

Ultimately then, reality tv comes to fruition when even very astute critics assume that the behaviors presented and narratives enacted on the programs are transparent and unmediated accounts of real world events and people. They ignore the highly constructed nature of these shows in much the way the critics discounted the artistic qualifications of the NEA Four, Anna Deavere Smith, and Bill T. Jones. Once again, most of these horrified critics write for right-leaning publications, which have a vested interest in assuming that the programs transparently document the amoral conditions of contemporary society. By focusing on the programs as evidence of general moral decay, they reinforce the self-confident rightist opposition between "us" and "them," between those who misbehave and appear on tv shows to prove it and those who know better. This tension is a product of the postmodern moment in which a wide array of popular forces threaten to dislodge the traditional boundaries between high art and popular culture.

²¹ Ed Vitagliano, "Leading Us Into 'Temptation,'" AFA Journal (online), March 2001, www.afa.net/journal/march/tva.asp, accessed 18 March 2001.

Postmodernism and Popular Danger

In Carnival Culture: The Trashing of American Taste, James B. Twitchell implies that the category of “postmodernism” is a convenient artistic construct designed to help members of the intellectual elite discuss popular forms. By this logic, postmodern artists are those high art producers who wish to associate themselves with the styles and desires of the mass audiences: “This tension on the margins where popular culture meets elite culture has given rise to our newest articulation of separation anxiety, the high take on low culture: postmodernism.”²² Twitchell figures postmodernism as a facile critical construct which allows high culture critics to celebrate and canonize low culture (read, mass media) works without risking accusations of appropriation or vulgarity. Twitchell’s argument claims, in short, that the term “postmodern” provides elite intellectual artists and critics the possibility of inhabiting two worlds (high culture and low culture) at once. He assumes that the commingling of these categories sets a dangerous precedent that ultimately leads to the disintegration of the elite cultural forms and society he would protect.

If “postmodernism” is the term used to describe the commingling of high and low art, perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon in the case studies I have examined comes from the misreadings of the video used in Still/Here. If human experience itself can threaten the self-contained formalist artwork, the documentation of vulgar experience on videotape which has proved so seductive to postmodern artists is especially problematic. Videotape – ubiquitous, popular, easily manipulated – provides one means

²² James B. Twitchell, Carnival Culture: The Trashing of American Taste (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 48.

by which the real experience of everyday citizens can dislodge the critical boundaries of high art. The postmodern rejection of strict genre categories disrupts the formalist critical contention that a given art work is accountable primarily to the ideal structural relationships of its genre. Instead, postmodernism celebrates the interplay between various art forms, and finds meaning in the sometimes contradictory relationship between genres. Croce is unable to read the videos used in Still/Here as art, seeing them only as disjointed, disconnected, uncontextualized images, which always trump artistic form. Instead, she reads them as television, thus evoking all of the cultural paranoia about the effect of television on society.

The anxiety over tv's stupefying effect on the contemporary psyche is prevalent in books of social criticism such as Amusing Ourselves To Death, by Neil Postman, and Twitchell's Carnival Culture. Postman, for his part, believes that television has created a world of disjointed, uncontextualized, trivial images: "[TV] has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience . . . It is the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business."²³ Postman's paranoid citation of "show business," the inherently low culture version of the high culture form "theatre," is telling. It indicates his formalist contention that high culture forms must protect themselves from the popular. High culture can not accommodate the unmediated, vulgar experience presented by (reality) tv.

²³Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 87, 92. See also Neal Gabler, Life The Movie: Jpw Emertainment Conquered Reality (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) for a discussion of entertainment as cultural paradigm.

The individual's constant bombardment with a wide array of video images is part and parcel of the condition of postmodernity. This is a determining factor of what Baudrillard calls "the hyperreal," defined by John Fiske as "our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between reality and its representations."²⁴ Fiske proposes in Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change (1996) that much contemporary popular culture bears out this theory of the hyperreal. However, rather than seeing this confusion as an indication of the imminent collapse of American civilization, Fiske figures these developments as a politically positive and potentially liberating cultural move: "When the terrain of a sitcom is as politically real as that of TV news or of a party convention, and its effectivity in an election campaign is indistinguishable from theirs, then the postmodern can be seen in process, and that process can be seen to contain significant emancipatory elements."²⁵ Fiske suggests that the dispersal of cultural power through a variety of popular forms can provide some measure of agency in the construction of social realities.²⁶ Importantly, Fiske does not assume that the current corporate-inspired breakdown between reality and illusion fostered by the reality tv phenomenon will lead to a facile and utopic dismantling of existing social power structures, pointing out that modernism and its attendant oppositions between representation and reality are "not killed off as easily as postmodernism assumes." He does, however, sense some progressive potential in the postmodern questioning of the nature of reality.

²⁴ John Fiske, Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 62.

²⁵ Fiske, Media Matters, 64.

²⁶ Fiske, 62-3.

In the latest macabre manifestation of the reality television debate, the print media has dreamed up a bizarre fantasy about the potential to televise the scheduled execution of condemned prisoner Timothy McVeigh. According to widely circulating reports, McVeigh, convicted of planting the bomb which destroyed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, wishes his execution would be broadcast to a national audience.²⁷ This sensationalist fantasy of the ultimate (both greatest and final) reality tv episode is fueled far more by the media's desire to capitalize on the potential horror of a live execution than on any real world potential for such an event to occur. In addition, these "news" stories are appearing at the same time as massive media coverage of both the latest installation of Survivor! (Survivor 2: The Australian Outback) and ABC's current entry in the reality tv sweepstakes, The Mole. Publicity for these shows also contributes to a hyperreal moment par none. In the same week that the McVeigh story broke, CBS publicized (but in the end did not actually broadcast) the slaughter of a wild pig on Survivor! and ABC promoted The Mole with the tag line, "Who will be executed next?" Television seems incapable of and perhaps uninterested in distinguishing between reality and illusion anymore. The implications are both troubling and oddly captivating.

Further Questions

Recently, I attended a domestic violence awareness event at Washington University in St. Louis. The centerpiece of the event was a production of Eve Ensler's

²⁷ The USA TODAY headline on February 15, 2001 read "To Watch Him Die, or Not" and quoted McVeigh as hoping that his execution would be broadcast not just to the victims and survivors of the blast but to a national audience (A1). Buried deep inside the story was the information that the Federal Bureau of Prisons had already announced their unequivocal position that a national broadcast of the execution would not take place.

play The Vagina Monologues (1999).²⁸ The play is a distillation of material Enslar compiled while interviewing more than 200 women about their experiences with and opinions about their bodies. Although the play is not by any means a documentary drama of the kinds discussed in Chapter Two of this project, Enslar makes a conscious effort throughout the text to repeatedly reconnect the various monologues with the “real life” individuals on which they are based. At the performance I attended, the auditorium was packed; it was one of the few sold-out performances at Washington University this year. Most of the people in the audience were friends and family members of the twenty women in the cast, who responded enthusiastically, applauding and cheering specific performers by name. The lobby of the theatre building was filled with exhibits and information tables from various campus and community activist groups, ranging from an interfaith pro-choice organization to Habitat for Humanity. Each program included a small index card on which were written the initials of a “real woman” suffering from domestic violence, and the audience was asked to spend the performance thinking about that woman and committing themselves to ending violence against women.²⁹ The play was followed by a casual discussion between the actors and the audience, which provided much opportunity for mutual congratulations, allowing everyone present to leave feeling positive about their participation in the production.

²⁸ Eve Enslar, The Vagina Monologues (New York: Villard, 2001).

²⁹ See Vivian Patraka’s discussion of a similar identification ploy at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in “Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absences, and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums,” Performance and Cultural Politics, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 89-107.

Tellingly, the play was produced by a campus organization dedicated to raising cultural awareness about violence against women, not by the performing arts department. The whole evening re-evoked and crystalized some of the questions that have surfaced as a result of this project. Why was the social activist community, not the performing arts department, the source of this dramatic production which in so many ways tried to make meaning of the real world implications of the issues involved? Why did the event producers select a theatre performance, rather than a panel discussion, workshop, guest speaker, film or documentary as the primary agent of social change in their effort to end real world violence? (Theatre, is, after all, the locus of imitation, of mimesis, of role playing, and much of the rhetoric around domestic violence has to do with ending the myths and pretense surrounding the issue.) How do the personal histories of the performers, histories known by so many in the audience, effect the reception of the work and the potential social efficacy of the piece? How, in certain cases, can a facile reference to real life individuals (individuals who remain “othered” by their reduction to sound bytes, to initials on cards), too easily erase any cognitive dissonance a work of art might otherwise produce?

Also, a great deal of research remains to be done into the history of audience response to documentary dramas and other forms based on real-life material. Since this late twentieth century flowering of performances based on real material represents only the latest incarnation of this impulse, one productive line of inquiry would examine other historical moments at which this kind of performance has captured the interest of theatre producers and audiences. For example, historical recreations, while outside of the scope of this paper, were an extremely popular aspect of early 19th century French theatre.

Although I know of no evidence supporting the idea that such productions generated any cultural anxiety in their historic moment, an inquiry into the popular reception of such pieces could provide a compelling counterpoint to the contemporary anxiety over art which confounds the boundaries between real and theatrical.

Although the performances I have addressed evoked critical anxiety over the relationship between high and low culture, as we have seen, the performance works themselves remain for the most part firmly entrenched in the high art realm of contemporary theatre production. Many more overtly popular forms continue to exploit the relationship between art and life. Television may be the most ubiquitous example of contemporary cultural productions which blur the boundaries of the real and the imagined, but many other contemporary forms play with these relations with abandon. Theme parks, freak shows, role-playing games and historical reenactment clubs are but a few categories of contemporary activities that capitalize on the human desire to manipulate reality per se. Perhaps the most revolutionary of these forms is virtual reality, which continues to hold forth the promise of all manner of experiences which do not, actually, happen. While for the moment virtual experiences remain limited in their scope and effectiveness (that is, their ability to produce sensations of authentic reality), the corporate investment in the development of this technology remains huge. I continue to wonder how “the real” will fare in a world where human interaction is increasingly mediated and contained by various electronic technologies.

Ultimately, these thoughts lead back to questions about the social construction of the concept of reality per se. These works raise questions because they confound the parameters of reality as we know it, and because they produce representations of reality

which persistently threaten the status quo. This is a quintessential postmodern moment. Old questions about the nature of reality and its relation to artistic production just don't fit anymore, because we are coming, as a culture, to suspect that competing versions of reality may actually all be true. Baudrillard has recently addressed this phenomenon with characteristic wit and insight:

It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information, or the excess of communication puts an end to communication. We are no longer dealing with problematic lack and alienation, where the referent of the self and the dialectic between subject and object were always to be found, supporting strong and active philosophical positions.³⁰

Baudrillard offers compelling insight into the condition of life in the postmodern world. The contemporary subject is confronted at every turn with proliferating images and competing versions of reality. The saturation of experience with multiple representations of reality ultimately fosters both the understanding that reality has indeed disappeared and the resultant desire for a stable ontological position. Anxiety over the vexed relationship between reality and illusion can only proliferate in a culture which remains preoccupied with its own image. Theatre must continue to provide one of the primary sites where this relationship will be explored.

³⁰ Baudrillard, The Vital Illusion, 66.

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