



Presenters and audience members gathering for *After the Show*, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, New York, 2013. Photo: Gavin Kroeber

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POSTSHOW THEATER

“Why do experimental theater makers persist in making shows rather than, say, encounters, parades, meals, businesses, vehicles, protests, games, or vacations?” This was the question we put to a group of artists, scholars, curators, and critics, each invited to contribute to a strange event at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, titled *After the Show*. We sought a polyvocal collection of submissions in various registers and asked that the contributors think of it as a “live publication,” but we might just as easily have called it a show . . . about not making shows. We chose the rhetorical figure of the *show* as a framing device because in one simple word it evoked our fundamental underlying concern: that while the experimental theater of the long twentieth century has shifted expectations about what might happen onstage and how it might be created, it does not seem to have fielded a commensurate challenge to the stage itself as the presupposed mode of spectatorship. *What* people watch is up for grabs, but *how* they watch doesn’t seem to be.

There are, of course, notable experiments that have pushed against theater’s attendant modes of presentation and spectatorship. Many of us in the field (call it the “downtown scene,” “contemporary performance,” “live art,” or what you will) are familiar with a canon of artists who have made a break with such conventions in one way or another—figures like Adolphe Appia, Antonin Artaud, or Augusto Boal who have attempted to integrate theater with (or dissolve it into) pedagogy, ritual, and/or activist intervention in daily life. Likewise the anti-theater of movements such as Futurism, Dada, and Happenings that emerged primarily from the visual arts has been incorporated into theater history’s catalog of transgressions. All of this work escaped, defied, or ignored the paradigm of the show, in one way or another. The contemporary landscape of ostensibly experimental theater, however, seems predominantly not to have inherited the impulse. Today’s works may admit a cacophony of styles, subjects, and materials as

content, but their presentation is for the most part predictable: audience members buy tickets, show up at the same time, sit quietly for a while, giving attention to the material within the frame of the stage (whatever shape that stage may take), and then collectively depart. There is a real irony here: in a field that has spent decades celebrating itself for becoming “postdramatic,” embracing the term *performance* to signal how much broader its range of wares is than strict *drama*,¹ it seems this unbound performance will be accommodated only as long as it fits inside the package of a *show*.

Show is hardly a technical term, of course, and yet we know a show when we see one: a parade is not a show, no matter how theatrical; a dinner party is not a show, no matter how immaculately its succession of tableaux are crafted. Our field is all about producing shows and not so much these other things (performative as they may be). So *show* serves (even if imprecisely) as a catchall for the web of formal and institutional structures that make theater legible *as theater*—and at the same time have served to limit what theater can be. This word maps in plain language the surprisingly limited horizon that us experimental theater seems to have accepted, and by placing it at the center of our event we hoped to get at an important set of artistic constraints that seem to be hiding in plain sight, invisible by virtue of their near total ubiquity.

From the outset we felt a certain sense of urgency—a sense that this question of the show is not a rehash of those that animated past theatrical experiments but historically specific, responding to and illuminating some of the most pressing issues in contemporary theater. We wondered if the show’s persistence points toward an exhaustion of theater’s experimental impulse. The theatrical experiments of past generations have been so embraced, rehearsed, and repeated that they have become the cornerstones of a recognizable style, rather than a consistent, radically experimental attitude toward form. We wondered whether the issue might speak to some of the mounting tensions and reciprocities between the performing arts and the visual arts. The contrast between the continued dominance of the show in the former² and the notably broader range of performance practices enjoying a resurgence in the latter³ beg at a minimum a consideration of conceptualism and the mechanisms by which it opened the visual arts to forms beyond the discipline’s traditional purview. Such a comparison invites a reevaluation of the downtown world’s reputation for trailblazing—does the field’s loyalty to the show hint at a desire to consolidate its position (into what Richard Schechner recently termed the “conservative avant-garde”),⁴ and to distance itself from a rising and profligate rival genealogy of performance? We wondered similarly whether the surprising resilience of the show might represent a ceding of performative innovation to the wider experience economy. This is a moment, after all, when institutions and their funders are scrambling to articulate how live performance might still matter in the brave new world of connected media—even as an abundance of guerrilla marketing campaigns and development-driven urban festivalism outside of the performing arts demonstrates that live performance is not only thriving but may matter too much. The recent waves

of immersive and participatory theater seem bent on emulating the branded theme park and the corporate experience designer, and yet they limit themselves to structures that are still by and large shows, even if slightly more ambulatory ones.

After the Show arose from an extended dialogue about these questions that the phenomenon of the show points toward today—fundamental questions of what theater *is*, what the horizons of its practice are, and whether they might deserve to be expanded. The two of us spent the better part of a year engaged in an off-and-on dialogue, only at the end selecting the show as a framing device that would let us highlight the possible forms of performance that exist beyond it and the questions they raise for the field.

A DIVERSITY OF PRACTICES

We should be clear, however: these concerns are not ours alone, nor did we come to them first. There are many practitioners in the us performing arts whose work both has a deep relationship to theater and at the same time pushes against its conventions—far more than we could ask to contribute to *After the Show*. Still, it seemed to us that these artists have in a way been laboring in isolation: their shared impulse to transgress the form of the show seemed unacknowledged. Many of the participating artists, for example, know one another personally and have even shown at the same venues, but attention has been given to other aspects of their work and this important commonality has rarely (if ever) been granted space for exploration. By convening these artists, we hoped to identify shared impulses among them directed at dismantling the show, to demonstrate that this work is not theoretical but already being conceived and executed.

Some of the contributing artists trouble the idea of the show even as they work within its structure, while others make work that escapes the show entirely. Some of them operate within the institutions and disciplinary protocols of the performing arts, while others work outside but in relation to them (often with a sense of ambivalence or uneasiness). Some of them simply propose works that defy the form of the show, bypassing the task of negotiating the industry's constraints by using the imagination as the venue for their works. It is worthwhile to take a moment to consider the range of strategies deployed by the *After the Show* contributors, each of which in some way addresses and/or undermines the paradigm of the show.

Several of the contributing artists propose works that are in fact “constellations” of works, made up of formally disparate components. Katie Pearl uses this term to describe her proposed piece *Arnie, Louis, and Bob*—a varied series of events thematically centered on the lives of her uncles and their best friend. She chooses this approach because, for her, a traditional play “can be *part* of the conversation, but it cannot *be* the conversation.”⁵ Similarly, Aaron Landsman suggests that his forthcoming *Perfect City* may involve several modes of presentation, only one of which is a traditional play. Without relinquishing any affinity for the particular experience of a show, these artists

place it within a web of other engagements. These other elements are not framed as “process,” as developmental punctuation marks leading up to a culminating show, but instead are validated as outcomes of a work with multiple entry points and a diversity of audiences.

Other contributions recall the twentieth-century avant-garde’s strategies for dissolving art into life (or life into art). Peppered with echoes of Augusto Boal’s “invisible theater,” Jerzy Grotowski’s “paratheater,” and Fluxus and Situationism, the anonymously authored instruction-interludes threaded throughout the evening (“spend a day physically pointing at as many objects as you can”)⁶ and the fictive project described in Alec Duffy’s short video (about a theater company that has created an intentional community founded on the principles of their rehearsal process) remind us of the assertion that art need not be a representational endeavor but instead a paradigm for remaking the everyday. These proposals, however, are framed respectively as preposterous dares and as an explicit fiction, suggesting that this tradition is invoked with more than a little skepticism.

Many contributing artists are discipline-jamming, using various means to intentionally confuse the borders between, for example, the performing and visual arts. The theater company Temporary Distortion is currently touring work that borrows heavily from the conventions of installation art in order to engage with a different kind of spectatorial attention. Artist David Levine’s oeuvre is dedicated almost wholesale to works that intentionally straddle the disciplinary divide between theater and visual art so effectively that he is himself difficult to position in either of these worlds. He stresses, however, that they are distinct, their borders determined not by the artist’s technique but by the presentational frame: “It’s theater if it’s presented within a theatrical context, and it’s art if it’s presented within an art context.”⁷ It’s fair to say that the disciplinary gap between the “black box” and the “white cube” emerged as one of *After the Show*’s central leitmotifs, with the work of Pearl Damour, Marc Arthur, and David Conison also demonstrating the variety of strategies deployed by artists who wish to operate across it.

It is worth giving focus to one particular aspect of this transdisciplinary impulse: namely, the relationship between work and the space in which it is created. Kenneth Collins of Temporary Distortion sparked a revealing discussion of this issue during our afternoon roundtable sessions. While in development, Temporary Distortion’s *My Voice Has an Echo in It* departed considerably from the traditional theatrical model in which different elements are created as separate modules and combined only during tech (actors are typically rehearsed without access to the finished set etc.). Like an installation, *My Voice* was fully realized within the studio before it premiered and Temporary Distortion was thereby able to work in ways usually unavailable during the standard theater production process, leaving sets and all the accoutrements of the work in the space rather than packing them out daily. Disciplines, of course, function by anticipat-



ing and promulgating particular artistic techniques and making resources available to them, and so Temporary Distortion's process raises the question of whether a performing arts industry accustomed to shared rehearsal spaces can find ways to provide this kind of studio space to artists that would take advantage of it.

The afternoon dialogue further addressed the capacity of such performance studios to serve not only as production spaces but also as unique venues, touching poignantly on the ways the recently shuttered Collapsible Hole had done so for its founding companies, Collapsible Giraffe and Radiohole. Key here is the argument that for an audience in a space like the Hole (or the Wooster Group's Performing Garage or Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theater, for that matter), the moment of the show feels less like an outward-oriented offering of theater via the presentational mechanism of a stage and instead like an invitation into a process, an opening inward into a living site of making. This is a delicate distinction to make but one with potentially profound impact for those attending. However, as urban policies in the thrall of development interests drive real estate further skyward in New York and so many other cities, the survival of such spaces seems less and less viable, and in turn the particular experience and disciplinary blur that loft performance has promised since 1970s SoHo seem to slip ever farther out of reach.⁸ There is perhaps no more worthy debate in our field than the one over whether this situation is better addressed by moving on to new

Temporary
Distortion's
*My Voice Has an Echo
in It*, Watermill
Center, New York,
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Steven Fetterman

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artistic strategies better accommodated to the conditions of the entrepreneurial city or by reinvigorating artists' historical role as community activists and political actors.

The visual arts are not, of course, the only alternative disciplinary model, and several participating artists have been producing theatrical works that encroach upon the territory of cultural forms at the edge of the arts or even outside of them, such as live action role playing, ritual, therapy, experience design, and tourism. Woodshed Collective's *The Office Project* breaks in some regards from the template established by other recent immersive theater works like *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell*, asking audience members to act not as voyeurs taking in an otherworldly atmosphere but as employees executing a series of tasks for a life insurance company. Still, the company chooses to work with a written script and a conventional theatrical run-time for their project, attracted to the particular narrative capacities that these aspects of the show offer. It is tempting to say that Odyssey Works goes much further, creating custom-designed multiday arcs of experience for carefully selected individuals, but the group's starting point is not theater. They are cultural producers borrowing from theater and elsewhere, not theater makers appropriating other forms. Regardless of disciplinary origins or loyalties, the work of both these companies and others like them charts a line between the traditions of theater and the much looser and younger conventions of the contemporary experience economy, in which corporations create durational immersive experiences to differentiate their products and better engage the consumer, operating on the principle that "work is theatre and every business a stage."⁹ In such an economy, the question of how artworks replicate or reinforce the ascendant profit-driven ideology of experience—and whether it is possible for immersive or participatory art to subvert it—is a matter worthy of more debate than it seems to have received.

THEATER AS TECHNE

Among the diverse contributions made to *After the Show*, we can recognize two major impulses running through all these strategies for art making, recurring so frequently that in hindsight the tension between them could be seen to define the event. First there is the impulse to approach theater as a construct—as a horizon of shared expectations that concern the relationship between the artist and the spectator—and second is the impulse to approach theater as a repository for techne, as a kind of heterogeneous pile of skill sets.

The first impulse, to approach theater as construct, is tied to the ways that we, as audience members, expect theater to demand our more or less undivided attention for a period of limited duration. We are willing to submit to that demand because we expect the work to take that responsibility seriously and to take care of us (entertain us, enlighten us, interest us, and/or provide us with a story to tell afterward) during this period of limited autonomy. This is the basic agreement that defines the show, and it is

quite different from, say, that which constitutes the gallery installation, in which spectators are not required to abandon their mobility to the same degree, nor is the artist guaranteed the spectator's undivided attention. Seen from this perspective, a sculpture put onstage therefore can become theater, and a play installed in a gallery can become visual art, because they are presented in the context of the expectations generated by those spaces and institutions. Theater is a constructed category set apart from other art forms or fields of cultural production by the ways a work conforms to these spectatorial-artistic expectations.

If theater is understood in these terms, our inquiry raises a host of questions. First, if theater, defined by its formal and institutional structures—by its spectatorial-artistic expectations—could transcend them, what exactly would be left? Or would a move beyond the show simply represent a work's migration into some other category? Is the desire to embrace performance beyond the show simply the latest reiteration of the antitheatrical impulse that has marked so much cultural history? Does it represent a denigration of theater in order to valorize work that strains against the discipline's strongest hallmarks—or to legitimize the abandonment of the field for another, elevating the visual arts or the experience economy as a superior terrain for creation? Seen this way, any thought of escaping the show seems to represent a paradoxical desire for theater without theater. When we hope for an expanded theater, for a theater that might exist after the show, we are hoping, perhaps naively, for a theatrical practice that neither reiterates the expectations of the theatrical context nor exchanges them wholesale for those of another discipline.

But there is another approach, a second impulse in tension with the first. This impulse, rather than treat theater as the sum of its conventions, seems to ask: if theater can be differentiated from its formal and institutional structures, what is it? Many of the works proposed or discussed during *After the Show* share in common the preservation of some form of theatrical technique, even as the surrounding formal structures are modified or abandoned. In her performance lecture, Yelena Gluzman redistributes the customary roles that define theatrical production and invites everyone in the room to direct each other as they are themselves directed, attempting to mobilize theatrical technique to dismantle the form's traditional hierarchies. In David Levine's recent piece *Character Analysis*, instead of having professional actors build their characters based on a playwright's text, he asks them to observe real-life subjects and, acting as portrait artists for these people who have agreed to "sit" for them, to attempt to *become* them, to inhabit their subjectivity as much as the techniques of method acting can possibly allow. David Conison and Jim Findlay both propose works that shift the focus from the stage to the rituals of its audiences—the fine art of post-show conversation and the hallowed tradition of sleeping through the show, respectively.

Theater is here treated not as an edifice but as *techne*—as the assemblage of varied ways of doing and knowing that are required to construct and maintain that edifice.

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David Levine's
Character Analysis,
Radcliffe Institute
for Advanced
Study at Harvard,
Cambridge, MA,
2013. Photo:
David Levine



Acknowledging the provisional and changing nature of theater, this second impulse prizes this rich terrain of skill sets over the whole that assembles them in particular ways. The task of the artist becomes not to operate within the dominant form of theater but to harness the proficiencies and expertise that it has allowed them to cultivate in order to identify the most interesting, seize them, disarticulate them from the monolithic understanding of theater, and mobilize them in a diversity of situations. The ethos here is not antitheatrical but rather one that recognizes that theater, like any discipline, can provide a scrap heap of dominant, residual, and emergent elements that can be merrily raided—pulling the copper pipes out of the basement, ripping the floorboards out to build something else. It is an ethos of being happily haunted by theater.

CARETAKING AND FRAUDULENCE

If theater can be treated as *techne* in this way, it is worth speculatively exploring two characteristic tendencies of the form that came up again and again in *After the Show* and its tributary conversations, two elements of theater that seem particularly relevant to today's world: *caretaking* and *fraudulence*.

In her contribution, Shannon Jackson notes that “it may be that there are really historically specific reasons . . . to consider now that what has been called the constricting apparatus of theater spectatorship has also always been about caretaking.”¹⁰ Karinne Keithley Syers writes, “I see you experiencing my care,” in her eloquent defense of the show as a “relational space of gathering, the feedback loop between my body and the audience’s bodies as I am seen and return the gaze.”¹¹ In the midst of an event exploring escape from the show, these two contributors mobilize notions of caretaking to perform a countervailing rearticulation of the form. They remind us that while theater’s signature mode of attendance has historically been conflated with political passivity, we must remember that there are many ways such a conventional audience can be assembled—and that this social contract between artist, audience, and presenter is possessed of a potentially radical capacity for mutual intentionality. On the one hand, these observations point toward the compelling possibility that the show might offer a space of resistance against the suspect commercial discourse of activation and participation that animates so much contemporary cultural production—within the theater world and well beyond it. On the other hand, these discussions also point toward a proficiency of theater that is perhaps not dependent on the show and so raise the provocative question of how the theatrical *techne* of caretaking might be manifested in a work that isn’t a show.

Similarly, we might consider the possibilities of unleashing another of theater’s particular proficiencies (perhaps its most infamous): its capacity for the production of artifice or, put more bluntly, fraudulence. Theater’s well-deserved association with falsehood and pretense is long-standing, and is partially responsible for much of the antitheatrical tradition that extends from Plato all the way through to the emphasis on authenticity found in early visual arts-based performance art. But perhaps it is worth considering how theater has historically served not only to generate and indulge in fraudulence, but also to quarantine it in an authorized site—that theater’s advertised fraudulence reciprocally certifies the authenticity of the world that exists beyond the footlights. In considering the prospect of an expanded theater, we might also consider the dizzying and dangerous experiment of releasing its radical fraudulence, setting it loose outside of the text and after the show. Unchecked fraudulence has the potential to be a powerful and destabilizing force, and the formal context of its deployment is critically important to its capacity to disrupt fixed hierarchies of thought, of discourse, of social position, and of political power. This avenue of investigation, while not entirely new, appears to us to be still insufficiently considered.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVISM

This is not to say that simply recognizing the possibility of alternative theaters such as these makes them a reality. Acknowledging the matrix of conventions that define theater is not the same thing as subverting, broadening, or shifting them—and even when an artist’s vision challenges them, she is hardly the only player with say about the nature of her work. The institutions of the industry, from presenters to funders to schools to the press, all play their roles in producing and policing the limits of the art form. As curator Caleb Hammons put it during the event’s afternoon discussion, “Theater institutions were never intended to support formally transgressive work, but to continue and care for the canon,” adding that “yes, some foundations have changed, and they’re paying for new work to be created—but within the same structures, structures never intended to foster new work.” Neither the event nor this essay has been able to afford such institutional questions the space they merit, but Hammons’s comment charts an important vector for further discussion: what are the curatorial, pedagogical, and philanthropic counterparts to the artistic works presented during *After the Show*? For there are pioneering institutions making such experiments and finding new approaches to fostering theatrical work. Temporary Distortion’s *My Voice Has an Echo in It*, for example, will be in residence at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center this fall, and the FIAF Crossing the Line Festival has given space to works that strain against the form of the show, such as Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s *Life and Times, Episode 5* (which takes the form of an illuminated manuscript read by flashlight) and Aaron Landsman’s *Perfect City*. Certainly there are many more examples taking place in the cracks of institutions and at the edges of the field that deserve close attention.

For the time being, we can offer simply that *After the Show* was organized around the principle that work that consistently challenges expectations might eventually change those expectations. The projects presented provide the foundations for an argument about the exciting possibilities offered by a broader approach to theater. Our ambition in gathering these resonant voices and projects is not to unmake theater as we know it, nor to deny the historical centrality and continuing relevance of the *theatron*, the “seeing-place” where something is *shown*. Instead we want to try to open space in the performing arts for a wider range of performance that includes works that raid and reconfigure the edifice of theater, rather than optimizing all the engines of production only for works that conform to its most entrenched hallmarks. Our hope is that *After the Show* will serve as a resource for anyone—artists, curators, producers, funders, critics, educators—seeking inspiration or a community of colleagues to support formally transgressive work. Moreover, it is a dossier of case studies for those trying to point out that there is an impulse away from the show quietly building strength across the field,

for those making the difficult case for doing things differently. We hope that it can serve as a platform for institutional activism.

What follows is a record of *After the Show*'s culminating evening presentations, structured as a playscript, highlighting our own attachment to the form of the show, even as we insist on its contingency.

NOTES

1. See in particular Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006).
2. The term *show* of course also has currency in the visual arts, where it is synonymous with *exhibition* and represents a very different set of presentational strategies and disciplinary expectations. We are not addressing this use of the term here.
3. This range includes not only the high-profile celebration of performance art luminaries both established (Marina Abramović) and newly anointed (Tino Sehgal) and the recently articulated phenomenon of “dance in the museum” but also a panoply of performative projects that have historically been gathered under rubrics such as “social practice,” “relational aesthetics,” “new genre public art,” and “project work.”
4. Schechner uses the term *conservative* to mean “something in line with ‘reduce, reuse, and recycle’” rather than to refer to contemporary political conservatism. See Richard Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 895.
5. See page 50 of this issue.
6. See page 39 of this issue.
7. See page 61 of this issue.
8. A decade ago, Mac Wellman connected the phenomenon of the transient experimental playwright to the impossibility of establishing fixed spaces in the contemporary New York real estate market—see Wellman, “Writer’s Bloc,” *Village Voice*, May 11, 2004, www.villagevoice.com/2004-05-11/theater/writers-bloc/.
9. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), 11.
10. See pages 58–59 of this issue.
11. See page 57 of this issue.