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Postmodernism and performance

At first glance, the phrase "postmodernism and performance" seems straightforward: a critical rubric that designates the postmodernist practices within a specific cluster of cultural categories. Yet even when touched upon lightly, this rubric shatters into a multitude of related yet distinct shards, each a different facet of the relationship it describes. I shall attempt in this chapter to outline some of those facets. I shall not survey the field; rather, I shall discuss selected works and figures that exemplify particular issues and practices. I shall also focus on the performance scene in the United States, simply because it is the one I know best. Although I shall discuss several types of performance, I shall focus largely on questions concerning postmodernism and theatre because the particularly problematic relationship between those terms raises provocative questions. The complexities and difficulties of thinking through the conjuncture of theatre and postmodernism are worth discussing for the ways they point to issues involved in locating postmodernism within the history and practices of particular art forms.

In large part, the conceptual complications of the relationship between postmodernism and performance derive from the instability of both terms, neither of which has a single, universally agreed-upon meaning. I shall not survey definitions of postmodernism here – suffice it to say that those who have made connections between postmodernism and performance have worked from a range of different definitions of postmodernism. I shall say something about the term "performance," however, because each of its meanings suggests a different connection to postmodernism. We most commonly associate the concept of performance with events whose appeal is primarily aesthetic, whether the traditional performing arts (theatre, dance, music, and opera), popular entertainments (e.g. circus, stand-up comedy, Las Vegas floor shows), or newer art forms (e.g. performance art). I shall leave music (and, for the most part, opera) aside, and observe that theatre, dance, and stand-up comedy have all been discussed in relation to postmodernism.

The concept of postmodernism functions in at least three different (but not mutually exclusive) ways in relation to aesthetic performance, depending on the type of criticism involved. (I speak primarily of criticism because, with the signal exception of some early postmodern dancers, performing artists generally have not used the word to describe their own work; it is a term used mostly by critics and scholars.) Relative to aesthetic performance, postmodernism has been used as: (1) a periodizing concept, (2) a way of describing the contemporary culture in which performances occur, and (3) a stylistic descriptor. Uses of the term "postmodern" to describe a moment in history (1) are somewhat difficult to distinguish from uses of the term to describe contemporary culture (2). Nevertheless, some commentators attempt to define a postmodern era by addressing such questions as when it began and how it differs from earlier historical moments, while others are content to describe contemporary culture as postmodern without delimiting its historical boundaries. Some critics use "postmodern" in still another way, as a stylistic term to identify new developments in aesthetic genres with well-established conventions (3). All three uses intersect, of course, since most critics ultimately wish to discuss how the distinctive characteristics of particular performances relate them to postmodernism in its historical and cultural senses.

One important manifestation of the differences between the historical and cultural conceptions of postmodernism is evident in the different uses of the adjectives "postmodern" and "postmodern*ist*." The term "postmodern" is often used to identify a particular historical period usually thought to have begun after World War II, though careful attention to the dates of most of the performances I discuss here will suggest that postmodernism in performance is largely a phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. "Postmodernist" often refers to cultural works that possess stylistic features that align them with postmodernism as a structure of feeling, an episteme, rather than a chronologically defined moment. Some performances that are clearly postmodern in the historical sense (that is, later than and different from their modern counterparts) are not necessarily stylistically postmodernist. (Some varieties of postmodern dance and most performance art monologues are examples.) I shall use the difference between "postmodern" and "postmodernist" as an heuristic to demonstrate throughout this essay the complexities of thinking about performance in terms of postmodernism.

The three uses of the term "postmodern" that I have described occur in discussions of theatre, dance, and the other performing arts. Another genre of aesthetic performance central to discussions of postmodernism is performance art (also called performance, art performance, and, especially in the United Kingdom, live art). The relationship of performance art to

postmodernism is different from the traditional performing arts in that performance art, which developed after World War II (though it has antecedents in the performance experiments of the early twentieth century avant-garde movements) is often taken to be an intrinsically postmodern art form, both historically and stylistically, rather than an art form with postmodern manifestations. One does not hear about "postmodern performance art" in the way one hears about "postmodern dance" and "postmodern theatre" because it is assumed that there is no other kind of performance art.

The final, and perhaps trickiest, definitional issue I shall mention is the way the concept of performance has become a trope in theories of postmodernism itself. Much of the discourse on postmodernism and aesthetic performance uses theories of postmodernism as grounds for analyzing trends in performance, thus suggesting that postmodernism and postmodern culture conceptually precede performance and that certain performances may be seen as symptomatic of postmodernism. But one of the earliest points at which the ideas of postmodernism and performance intersected was a collection of essays called *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (1977) (not *Postmodernism in Performance*, for instance). Michel Benamou, one of the editors of *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, adopts the opposite of the usual position in the introduction to this collection, where he identifies performance as "the unifying mode of the postmodern."[1] The dominant characteristic of postmodern culture, as he describes it, is that everything performs: technologies perform; art is no longer content to stay on the museum wall; literary critics see their writings as performances; political and social developments are performed in the public arena – the media, in particular, make political and social developments performative.

It is ironic that, whereas critical discussions of specific performance practices usually draw on ideas of postmodernism and its characteristics from other disciplines (especially architecture and literary theory), other disciplines have appropriated the idea of performance. As an interpretive paradigm, the idea of performance has been used to describe everything from static art forms to everyday behavior, to political demonstrations and terrorism, to large-scale social conflicts. The "postmodern turn" in a variety of humanistic and social scientific disciplines amounts mainly to viewing those disciplines and their objects of study in performance terms. Scholars in history, sociology, anthropology, and many other fields have come to see their respective discourses as contingent rather than absolute; as engaged with specific audiences rather than autonomous; as existing primarily in a specific, time-bound context; and as characterized by particular processes rather than by the products they generate. It is significant that one of the new, arguably postmodern disciplines to emerge from this intellectual ferment is

performance studies, which takes performance in the expanded sense that subsumes aesthetic performances, ritual and religious observance, secular ceremonies, carnival, games, play, sports, and many other cultural forms as its object of inquiry and unites the tradition of theatre studies with techniques and approaches from anthropology, sociology, critical theory, cultural studies, art history, and other disciplines.

In this brief overview, we have already arrived at a disorienting post-modern juncture. When thinking about aesthetic performances in relation to postmodernism, the basic critical question is usually: in what sense is a given performance or kind of performance postmodern(ist)? Benamou turns that question around to suggest that the critical question central to discussions of postmodernism and performance is: in what ways is postmodern culture performative? Postmodernism, which seemed initially to be the privileged term in the rubric "postmodernism and performance," is now the subordinate term. What should we be looking for – the postmodernism in performance or the performance in postmodernism? Wherever we begin, we shall inevitably end up talking about both, though the emphasis here will be on the former.

Periodizing postmodernism in theatre and dance

As dance historian, critic, and theorist Sally Banes points out in *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, her crucial work on post-modern dance, "the term post-modern means something different in every art form."[2] (Banes and some other commentators hyphenate the term "post-modern"; I have retained this orthography when discussing their work.) For one thing, what counts as postmodern for any particular art form is relative to what counts as modern for the same form; the unevenness of the concept of postmodernism across the arts is partially a function of a similar unevenness in definitions of modernism. Banes defines the historical transition from modern dance to post-modern dance quite clearly, both chronologically and stylistically. "By the late 1950s, modern dance had refined its styles and its theories and had emerged as a recognizable dance genre. It used stylized movements and energy levels in legible structures . . . to convey feeling tones and social messages" (p. xiii). Feeling that "the bodily configurations modern dance drew on had ossified into various stylized vocabularies, dances had become bloated with dramatic, literary, and emotional significance, dance companies were often structured as hierarchies" (p. xvi), the first wave of post-modern choreographers (1960–73) sought to create dances that would be nonliterary in content, created from accessible movement vocabularies (sometimes based on everyday movement

and using untrained dancers), and more democratic. As Banes develops her account, she does not reduce the multiple styles of dance after modern dance to a single type but still is able to offer a persuasive narrative of post-modern dance as a reaction against modern dance that occurred at an identifiable historical moment.

When we turn from dance to theatre, however, it is not possible to paint such a clear picture. For one thing, it is difficult to establish what postmodern theatre may have reacted against because a coherent description of modern theatre is hard to construct. Normally, the expression "modern theatre" refers to the realistic (as opposed to Romantic) plays and performance practices that began to develop around the mid-nineteenth century in England and culminated initially in the late nineteenth-century European realist plays of Ibsen and Chekhov, then in the realist drama that flourished in the United States and United Kingdom after World War II. To identify modern theatre with realism, however, is to imply that the postmodern impulse in theatre would be antirealistic. The problem there is that antirealist theatre developed alongside realist theatre in the nineteenth century (with the Symbolists, for instance) and really constitutes an alternative strain of modern theatre. This confusion has made it very difficult to place certain figures. For example, are Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, playwrights who challenged realism equally radically though from very different directions, to be considered modernists or postmodernists or transitional figures?

The analysis of postmodernism in theatre is further complicated by the relationship between text and performance that characterizes the form. There is a disjuncture between the performance and the text being performed in theatre that does not exist in dance. In dance, performance style and genre are encoded in the choreography. It is no more possible to perform a classical ballet in a postmodern dance style than it is to perform it in a tango style. (It might be possible to do a postmodern dance based on the underlying narrative or theme of a classical ballet – a postmodern *Swan Lake*, for instance – but that would require new choreography in a style associated with postmodern dance. It would be impossible to perform Balanchine choreography, say, in a postmodern style.) In the contemporary theatre, however, it is assumed that style is not written into dramatic texts; it is therefore perfectly possible to imagine Shakespeare or Greek tragedy performed in a postmodern style. In fact, some important examples of postmodernist theatre – such as the work of the director Peter Sellars, whom I discuss later – are precisely those in which a nonpostmodern play was presented using a postmodernist production style. Opera is an interesting case in this context in that the musical aspect is similar to dance, while the staging is similar to theatre. If one

plays the score as written, one cannot perform a nineteenth-century opera in a postmodern musical style. But the same nineteenth-century opera could be staged in a postmodernist style.

We cannot explore the idea of postmodern theatre, then, without exploring the questions of postmodern drama and of postmodern production styles. For the reasons I have already suggested, very few suggestions have been offered as to what may constitute postmodern drama, but I shall risk some speculations. One simple but important point is that pluralism is historically a postmodern phenomenon in the theatre (though not necessarily a postmodernist one). The vast majority of the playwrights produced on the modern, Anglo-American and European stages well into the 1960s were white males whose sexuality generally was not discussed openly if it was not known to be hetero. As a result of the influence of theatrical movements directly informed by the identity politics of social movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, women playwrights, playwrights of color, and queer playwrights are now much better represented both in the theatre and in the monologue performances that have become the most popular style of performance art.

Though still debated, nontraditional casting in which actors whose race (and sometimes gender) does not match those of the characters they play is another form of pluralism characteristic of the postmodern stage. Intercultural performance, in which elements of performance traditions originating in different national and cultural settings are intermixed to form the theatrical equivalent of world music, is also a postmodern theatrical practice. It, too, has been highly controversial, prompting questions concerning the degree to which artists from western societies appropriate from performance traditions they do not really understand and the cultural imperialism that may be implicit in their use of such traditions. British director Peter Brook's production based on the ancient Indian *Mahabarata* (produced in 1989) was a flashpoint for these debates.

Performance art monologues

This postmodern plurality of voices is particularly evident in the monologue performances that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s. This genre probably originated with Spalding Gray, a veteran of the New York experimental theatre scene who had worked with both the Performance Group, one of the most famous of the Vietnam War era radical theatres, and its descendant, the Wooster Group (I shall have more to say about this theatre later). Beginning in 1975, Gray became interested in working on intensely autobiographical performances that were acts of self-scrutiny for him. Initially, he worked with the Wooster Group on the series of highly abstract, collectively created

performance pieces known as The Rhode Island Trilogy. Around 1979, however, he began narrating his own life directly in a deadpan style somewhat reminiscent of stand-up comedy. His first performance in this vein was *India and After (America)*; he has gone on to make the autobiographical monologue his primary form of performance and continues to chronicle his life to the present. He recounts both his professional life as a fringe performer who flirts continuously with mainstream success and the neuroses and narcissism that color his personal life.

Although Gray himself is a white, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, American male of upper-middle-class origins (albeit one inclined toward lifestyle experimentation and bohemianism), he helped to open the door to performers who self-consciously represent a range of very different identity positions and social experiences. The performers who have availed themselves of the monologue form include Karen Finley, who has performed intense, hypnotic rants with a feminist slant; Tim Miller, who describes his experiences as a gay man; Charlayne Woodard, who has performed monologues about her experiences as an African-American woman; Josh Kornbluth, whose autobiographical account includes the experience of growing up in a Jewish Communist household; and many others. Some of these performers, like Gray, were trained as actors, while others, such as Finley, come from a visual arts background. Still others, like Margaret Cho, are stand-up comics who emphasize autobiographical narrative in their performances. While some performers who employ this form remain close to its origins in experimental theatre and performance art, others exploit its entertainment potential. The ubiquity of the autobiographical monologue was so pronounced in the art world of the late twentieth century that one wag described it as the screenplay of the 1990s (in the sense that everyone seemed to have written one).

The death of character: postmodern/ist drama

Although the performance-art monologue is historically a postmodern form, it is not postmodernist and is formally quite different from postmodernist theatre. In an essay of 1983 pointedly titled "The Death of Character," theatre critic and scholar Elinor Fuchs discussed a development in theatre that she considered to be the harbinger of postmodernism in theatre: a de-emphasis of the modern concept of psychologically consistent dramatic characters in favor of fragmented, flowing, and uncertain identities whose exact locations and boundaries cannot be pinpointed.[3] Insofar as most performance art monologues posit stable and locatable identities assumed to define the performer, they are not postmodernist though they do represent part of

the postmodern trend of pluralism in performance. Taking Fuchs's observation as a starting point, I shall briefly discuss two plays: Sam Shepard's *Angel City* (first produced in 1976) and Jeffrey M. Jones's *Der Inka Von Peru* (first produced in 1984). I have chosen these examples because they provide insight into the status of character in postmodern dramaturgy. I include Shepard's play as an example of proto-postmodernist drama and also to provide a contrasting example that will help to foreground the postmodernist aspects of Jones's play.

Shepard is known as one of the most radically experimental writers associated with the New York Off-Off Broadway movement of the 1960s. Compared with some of his earlier plays, *Angel City* is relatively conventional; it has a fairly clear plot that develops in a more or less linear fashion. But when the second act begins, most of the characters are very different than they were at the end of the first act: the stereotypically sexy Hollywood secretary becomes a floor-scrubbing nun who speaks in an Irish accent, for instance. It is never quite clear whether these characters have been transformed somehow or whether they are enacting their own ideas or fantasies of themselves. In his preface to the play, Shepard states: "The term 'character' could be thought of in a different way when working on this play. Instead of the idea of a 'whole character' with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme."[4]

Shepard's concept of character here certainly seems to evoke the idea of the fractured, postmodern self (though he does retain the notion of a "central theme"); in that respect, the play may be said to touch on the nature of postmodern subjectivity, a major question in postmodern culture and theory. In other respects, however, one would have to say that the play is not postmodernist at all. Shepard's decentered, fragmentary characters serve a play that is essentially satirical: Shepard bitterly attacks the film industry and indicts Hollywood for living by false, corrupting values, which it imparts to its customers. It is very possible that the characters' transformations are a result of the entertainment industry's colonization of their psyches. In its celebration of traditional values (represented by the protagonist's use of Native American ritual) that are rapidly being corrupted by the contemporary culture industry, *Angel City* is actually quite conservative.

From the point of view of one of the most influential theories of postmodernism, Shepard's overtly critical and satirical tone disqualifies *Angel City* as postmodernist despite the way Shepard points to a new, antimodern understanding of dramatic character. Fredric Jameson's discussion of how pastiche has replaced parody under postmodernism is useful to understand this

dimension of theatrical postmodernism because he links it to "the disappearance of the individual subject," a phenomenon that has direct implications for the concept of dramatic character. According to Jameson, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar, unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives ... Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs."[5] Although *Angel City* is a satire, not a parody (though it contains parodies of movie genres), it is clear that Shepard had critical ulterior motives for writing it – its perspective cannot be described as neutral.

My other example, Jeffrey M. Jones's *Der Inka Von Peru*, is a play made up entirely of modified texts the author appropriated from existing sources, including a history of Peru, a romance novel, and other plays, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* among them.[6] The combination of these sources produces five discrete but overlapping plots, most of which are melodramatic in nature. Lines of dialogue recur verbatim in shifting contexts and different versions of the same action (such as romantic intrigues) appear. While an audience may see the various plots as commenting on one another, there is no clear purpose behind this formal experiment, no direct thematic statement (as there is in *Angel City*). In Jameson's terms, the play is a pastiche of melodrama that evokes and incorporates a variety of texts and genres in a way that is often humorous but that does not provide the critical perspective of parody or satire.

Because the characters in *Der Inka Von Peru* are delineated through lines of dialogue drawn from different historical eras and genres of writing (some of the dialogue is in verse, some in prose) no character's use of language provides a consistent sense of that character's identity. Far from being individual subjects, the characters are patchworks of second-hand language who use words that clearly belong to others, not to themselves, not even to the author who created them. In his notes to the play, Jones delineates an approach to acting in which the actor breaks the text down into multiple fragments and figures out how to perform each fragment as if it were an autonomous action. The various fragments are then assembled. This way of thinking treats characters as textual entities rather than psychological ones, as collections of individual performed moments rather than products of a consistent, overall interpretation. Although Jones's description of the acting process displays a kinship with Shepard's ideas of the fragmentary character, Shepard retains the idea of a main theme – understood more in a musical sense than in a psychological one – from which the character's behavior departs, even when that behavior is wildly inconsistent. Jones's characters, who are pastiches drawn from numerous sources, have no such center.

Shepard and Jones both suggest that a postmodernist approach to acting is one in which characters are understood to be made up of fragments: words and actions that cannot be expected to add up to a psychologically consistent entity. In both the plays I have discussed here, the characters' fragmented state is the result of having absorbed their cultural environment. In Shepard's play, this is the case at a thematic level – the characters' behavior is influenced by their consumption of movies. In *Der Inka Von Peru*, however, the characters' relationship to their cultural environment is ontological, not just thematic. The characters do not represent human beings who have seen too many movies but are themselves literally collages of texts drawn from a variety of cultural contexts.

A postmodernist approach to directing

My discussion of postmodernism in dramatic literature has also been a discussion of what postmodernist acting might be. Turning from what we see on stage to the theatrical processes that created it, I shall look briefly at postmodernist directing. Modern approaches to directing might generally be characterized as emphasizing the discovery of a central action and theme in a play and expressing them through an appropriate and consistent production style. By contrast, Don Shewey describes the work of US-based director Peter Sellars as reflecting "the post-modern impulse toward cultural collage."[7] Sellars has brought the songs of George Gershwin into a play by the turn-of-the-century Russian author Maxim Gorky and modified the text of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (a play selected for the fledgling American National Theatre at least in part for its historical reference, since Eugene O'Neill's father, the actor James O'Neill, performed it throughout his career) by interpolating passages from the New Testament and Lord Byron, and music by Beethoven, among other materials. He is well known for nontraditional casting and also cast actors in his 1985 production of *Monte Cristo* who are associated with different cultural strata, including the New York avant-garde and the television industry. Rather than seeking a play's intrinsic focal points, he works associatively, juxtaposing texts and performance elements in various styles and connecting the play with other cultural texts to produce a hybrid.

As Shewey points out, Sellars's career as a director has been quite different from that of his predecessors in theatrical experimentation in that he has not had to define himself strictly as an avant-gardist but has worked in a variety of seemingly mutually exclusive cultural contexts, ranging from the Boston Shakespeare Company to Broadway to an abortive attempt to establish an American National Theatre in Washington, DC, to the world's opera houses,

and to the Sydney Olympics, among many others. This is an important point: since at least the late nineteenth century, the world of performance has been stratified by distinctions between high and low culture (e.g. theatre and opera versus night-club floor shows and rock concerts) and between mainstream and avant-garde (e.g. Broadway versus Off-Off Broadway). These distinctions persist into the postmodern era, though some makers of performance have managed to transcend them. Sellars is one example; the actor Willem Dafoe, who has parallel careers as a performer with the Wooster Group and as a Hollywood film star, is another. Still another is performance artist Laurie Anderson, whose work straddles the line between avant-garde performance art and pop music and is popular with both audiences.

Postmodernism and stand-up comedy

Some popular cultural performance genres responded to the same issues confronted by the theatre in a postmodern cultural environment. Like theatre and performance art, stand-up comedy became a more diverse enterprise under postmodernism. In the United States, there is a long-standing tradition of male comics, many of them of Jewish heritage, who were joined from the 1960s onwards by African-American comics. The postmodern 1980s saw a much larger number of women than ever before doing stand-up, and both Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans became visible in that field as never before. Two of the postmodern developments I mentioned in connection with theatre had parallels in stand-up. As the eclipse of parody by pastiche indicated by Jameson shows, the very notion of comedy itself had become problematic under postmodernism. Comedy by definition requires stable referents, norms against which behaviors may be deemed humorous. In the absence of such norms, it is impossible to define comedy. Some comics responded by becoming metacomedians whose performances took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject.

Steve Martin, in particular, exemplified this tendency in his stand-up of the mid-1970s. Martin adopted the gestures, tone, and manner of the traditional stand-up comic, of a simultaneously smug and desperate comedian who would resort to wearing rabbit ears or a fake arrow through his head to get a laugh. The rabbit ears and arrow, novelty items available at any joke shop, represented the dead-end to which comedy had come: the only thing left to do was to recycle highly conventional signs for that-which-is-supposed-to-be-funny rather than attempting fresh comedy. Martin's pastiche of stand-up comedy was void of content: his performance persona was blank and cynical, clearly only going through the motions and treating the conventions of

stand-up comedy as a dead language, as if to suggest that there was nothing left to laugh at except the idea that someone actually might try to make others laugh.

The other problematic confronted by both theatre and stand-up was that of character. Traditionally, stand-up comedians present a consistent persona to represent the perspective from which they make their comic observations. But just as some postmodernist playwrights created dramatic characters as collections of fragmentary texts rather than psychologically consistent beings, some stand-ups also eschewed the presentation of clearly defined comic personae. One of the most radical of these was Andy Kaufman, who appeared at some of his early club dates as The Foreign Man (later the basis for the character of Latke that he played on the television program *Taxi*). As The Foreign Man, Kaufman spoke in an almost impenetrable Eastern European accent and portrayed a completely incompetent comic who would botch the punchlines of his unfunny "jokes," then insist on starting his entire act all over again each time he made an error until the audience could stand it no longer. Kaufman did not reveal that The Foreign Man was a fictional construct, but would unexpectedly launch into a skilled impersonation of Elvis Presley that seemed beyond The Foreign Man's abilities and then thank the audience once again as The Foreign Man. In a television special, Kaufman added another layer to this performance by seeming to drop the character of The Foreign Man and becoming "himself," a nasty and aggressive figure who demanded that the audience return items of clothing he had tossed while impersonating Elvis. This persona, while seemingly closer to the "real" Kaufman, was yet another construct, no more real than The Foreign Man or Andy as Elvis. In place of a consistent comic persona, Kaufman created a hall of mirrors in which no persona ever turned out to be a dependable representation.

Re-presentation in postmodernist performance

Jeffrey M. Jones's appropriationist playwriting and Peter Sellars's genre-busting directing are examples of theatrical practices one can describe as both postmodern and postmodernist. Nevertheless, both retain the basic procedures of the modern theatre: they are text-based and follow the Play–Production–Performance model in which a script is interpreted by a director and performed by actors. Even if the constituent elements in this process reflect postmodern culture and postmodernist aesthetics, the process leaves the apparatus of modern theatre unchallenged. Let us embark, then, on a different quest by looking at theatrical practices that do challenge the authority of the modern theatrical apparatus.

We shall begin that quest with the Living Theatre, founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina in New York City in the 1950s but best known for its productions in Europe at the high point of the 1960s counterculture, of which it is a famous exemplar. Beck and Malina inaugurated the Living Theatre as a poets' theatre specializing in the production of rarified dramatic works, but ultimately became interested in working collectively with other performers to create work directly without starting from a play. Their work in this vein began with *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (1964) and culminated in *Paradise Now* (1968). A large part of their motivation was political: as committed left-wing anarchists, they wanted the performances they made to reflect the values according to which they lived.

Directly and indirectly, two (if not three) generations of experimental theatre artists have taken inspiration from Beck and Malina's approach to making theatre without necessarily embracing their politics. The Open Theatre, The Performance Group, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, among many other radical theatres of the Vietnam War era, took up the idea of collective creation and the notion that theatre did not necessarily begin with a script but could depart from improvization, ideas, and images shared among the cast, and similar sources. These theatres, in turn, provided models for groups that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, their approach now often called *devising*. (Devised performance is thus distinguished from scripted theatre.)

This kind of theatre was postmodernist not only in the way it redefined the procedures and hierarchies of the modern theatre but also in its radical approach to the question of theatrical representation. Whereas it is usually supposed that the function of actors is to represent fictional beings, the performers in the radical theatres of the 1960s were often present as themselves. When the performers in the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* confronted the spectators, saying, "I am not allowed to travel without a passport" and "I don't know how to stop the wars," they were speaking for themselves, not playing characters who were making these declarations.[8] Even when the Performance Group did Shepard's play *The Tooth of Crime* in 1972, the presence of the actors trumped that of the characters they played. This was partly because the environmental staging in which actors and audience occupied the same space necessitated that the actors speak directly to the spectators and instruct them as to where to stand or where to look. Because the actors were constantly moving in and out of character, one saw them as people who were sometimes acting and sometimes not – their presence as real performers outweighed their presence as fictional characters.

In an essay of 1982, Canadian performance theorist Josette Féral identified this nonrepresentational approach as the key difference between traditional theatre and performance art: "since it tells of nothing and imitates no one,

performance escapes all illusion and representation."[9] (This is another point at which to observe that an aesthetic strategy that is postmodernist in relation to one art form may be modernist in relation to another. Féral derives her account of performance art's antirepresentational stance from the work of the art historian and critic Michael Fried, for whom opposition to representation is a hallmark of modernist visual art.)

The antirepresentational stance of the radical theatre and much performance art does indeed distinguish both sharply from conventional theatre. The monologue performances I mentioned earlier are not postmodernist insofar as they present the performer as possessed of a defined and stable identity, but they are postmodernist in their implications concerning representation, since the performer appears in his or her own person and claims to eschew fictional character. This is also true of earlier and more extreme versions of performance art, such as body art. When Vito Acconci, for example, sets out in *Conversions* (a film of 1971) to turn his body into a woman's body by burning the hair away from his breasts, attempting to enlarge them, and performing various movements with his penis tucked between his legs, it is Acconci, not a character played by Acconci, who executes these actions (and he really does perform them – he does not simulate burning his chest hair).

Of course, in all these cases the overall performance situation is more complex than the label "antirepresentational" suggests. Even though the performers do not represent fictional characters, the way their actions are framed by the performance context means that the audience does not perceive them directly as real people, either. What the audience sees is a performance persona that may resemble the performer's "real self" but is not actually identical to that self. The resulting "undecideable argument between presentation and re-presentation" (also apparent in the work Andy Kaufman did in a popular cultural context) is itself a postmodernist phenomenon, as Benamou suggests.[10]

Postmodernist political theatre

Once we move beyond the authorial and representational strategies of the radical theatres of the 1960s, however, we encounter a familiar problem: while their approach to making theatre and to representation were postmodernist, their politics and their way of making political art was not. The antirepresentational strategies of postmodernist theatre and performance art, strategies that overtly questioned the truth-value of any and all representations, could not accommodate the radical theatre's desire to represent both the society they sought to change and the utopian community they hoped to

bring into being. Additionally, the radical theatre positioned itself as part of a counterculture set apart from the dominant culture. Inasmuch as the postmodern world of global communications and capital appears not to have an "outside," it seems fruitless for political artists to claim to interrogate postmodern society from such a position.

Postmodernist political art in all forms, then, does not deal directly with topical political issues in the manner of earlier political art. Rather, it must find ways of interrogating the political and social configurations of postmodern culture without leaving its own representations unquestioned and without claiming to take up a position outside of postmodern culture from which to comment on it. One theatre that developed such an approach is the Wooster Group, a New York theatre collective that evolved in the early 1980s from the Performance Group. Because of its history, many observers expected the Wooster Group to purvey a more conventionally political brand of theatre than it did and were somewhat taken aback by the Wooster Group's more oblique strategies. I shall briefly discuss one of its performances, *LSD – Just the High Points* (1984–5), to provide a sense of one version of postmodernist political theatre.

LSD, devised by the Wooster Group and its director, Elizabeth LeCompte, incorporated materials from a wide variety of cultural texts, including parts of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, writings by and about members of the Beat Generation in the 1950s and LSD advocate Timothy Leary's circle in the 1960s, a reenactment of a rehearsal for *LSD*, and much else. Some of these texts were factual, some fictional; some, like *The Crucible*, were fictional recreations of actual events. The members of the Wooster Group presented these multiple texts through a variety of types of performance that included conventional acting, reading with text in hand, re-creating their own behavior from videotape, and repeating words while listening to them on a sound recording. At times, the performers spoke words associated with fictional characters while, at other times, they were there "as themselves," but these various presentations were not sharply delineated and they blended into one another. These performance strategies themselves raised questions about the interplay of presentation and representation, fact and fiction, that seemed to reflect a postmodern world in which those kinds of distinctions are no longer clear-cut.

The thematic terrain of *LSD* was broad and far-reaching. The articulation of a number of kinds of historical documentation through the varieties of acting, reading, and performing already discussed raised questions about the nature of both the documentary materials themselves and their re-presentation. Some of the materials were "official" accounts of earlier historical periods while others were more personal; the Wooster Group did

their own research, interviewing members of Leary's circle. The performance implied, but did not answer, such questions as: Is informal spoken testimony more dependable than "official" (for-the-public) writings? Are there meaningful differences between the performers' reading, acting, or repeating these materials? What the production ultimately demonstrated was the eradication of difference among these many types of messages and articulations – written and spoken, factual and fictional, literal and metaphoric, public and private – through the mediation of performance; it thus mimed the eradication of such differences in postmodern culture at large. The production made no attempt to assess the truth-value of any one documentation over any other, or of any mode of presentation over any other: it was presented as much as a symptom of information's self-consumption as an analysis of it. The Wooster Group thus did not claim to comment on this phenomenon from without, but created an analytical image of an information-glutted, postmodern society by positioning itself at the interior of such a society.

To explain how the Wooster Group's image of an information-saturated society is analytical, I shall conclude by contrasting it with theatre practices that are symptomatic of postmodern culture but do not enable audiences to adopt an analytical stance toward it. Jameson points to an aspect of postmodern culture that has proven crucially important for the theatre when he uses the word "mediatization" to describe "the process whereby the traditional fine arts…come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system."[11] This has meant that the theatre can no longer be seen as occupying a fine-arts context that is culturally distinct from film, television, and the other media. The collapse of the distinction between fine arts and mass media has meant that the theatre now functions as a medium and has to compete for audiences directly with the other media.

One result has been that the theatre often does not seek to provide original expression – rather it draws on film, television, and popular music for its materials. In some cases, this has meant that plays are actually live productions of films or television programs – Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is a case in point. More recently, stage musicals have been developed from the film *The Sweet Smell of Success* and the music of the pop groups Abba (*Mama Mia*) and Queen (*We Will Rock You*). To a large extent, this kind of cultural production supposes that audiences are interested only in seeing things they have seen before; the market has generally validated this supposition. When the theatre repurposes existing materials, its productions are no longer autonomous works of art but take their places on chains of individual commodities that constitute large cultural texts – in many cases, these commodities include books, sound and video recordings, fast-food tie-ins, plush toys, and bed sheets. The way the commercial theatre absorbs and

recycles existing texts from other media is formally similar to the appropriationist strategies of Jones, Sellars, and the Wooster Group. Unlike the latter's self-consciously postmodernist work, however, these productions are merely symptomatic of the postmodern cultural condition and provide no foothold for an analysis of that condition.

Conclusion

Although it is possible to present a coherent developmental narrative of postmodern dance as a self-conscious response to modern dance, such a narrative is much more difficult to construct for theatre and other forms of aesthetic performance. Nevertheless, I have identified certain postmodern trends that cut across performance genres and cultural categories.

One of the most significant trends in postmodern performance has been toward pluralism and diversity. This has meant that the theatre is no longer as dominated by ostensibly heterosexual white male playwrights as it once was: plays by authors clearly acknowledged to belong to a range of other identity positions are now much more visible than in the past. Pluralism is also manifest in the still controversial practices of nontraditional casting and intercultural performance. Dance, too, has a form of nontraditional casting: since the 1960s, postmodern dance has employed a range of body types never seen previously in dance, including untrained dancers, dancers with non-athletic bodies, and disabled dancers. Even such popular cultural forms of performance as stand-up comedy reflect the trend toward pluralism: since the 1980s, the range of identity positions represented on the stand-up comedy stage and in television programs and films derived from stand-up is much greater than at any earlier time. In a different vein, I have argued here that the growing trend in commercial theatre toward repurposing existing cultural texts into performances is likewise a postmodern development.

In addition to having manifestations in the traditional performing arts, postmodernism has seen the development of new art forms, performance art among them. The term "performance art" covers a vast array of practices. I have alluded here to only two, which are at opposite ends of the performance-art spectrum. The body art of the early 1970s was conceptually and physically demanding, even seemingly masochistic. Although there are performance artists who continue to work in updated versions of that genre, including the Montenegran artist Marina Abramovic and the French artist Orlan, much performance art today takes the more popular form of the autobiographical monologue. In some hands, such as Karen Finley's, the monologue can be a highly charged and aggressive form of performance that places substantial demands on its audience. In the majority of cases, however,

the autobiographical monologue is an accessible and popular form through which performance art, once considered an experimental and avant-garde genre, has entered the cultural mainstream.

Comparing the features of historically postmodern performance with performance that articulates postmodernism as a new structure of feeling, we run into contradictions. Some performance practices that are unquestionably postmodern, such as those of most performance-art monologists and much of the theatre that reflects postmodern pluralism, are not postmodernist because they rest on the epistemological assumptions characteristic of the modern, including the idea of the unitary self. Postmodernist theatre has challenged that assumption by presenting characters whose fragmentary identity is constructed from bits of cultural texts. Even in stand-up comedy, some performers have undermined the idea of a consistent, distinctive comic persona.

A similar contradiction appears when we consider the radical theatres of the 1960s. These theatres deserve a place in an account of postmodern performance on account of the ways they destabilized the hierarchical apparatus of modern theatre through their frequent elimination of the playwright in favor of collectively devised performances. These theatres frequently eschewed traditional actorly representation in favor of performers who appeared in their own persons, as is often the case in performance art as well. (This shift led to a practical and theoretical distinction between traditional acting and a new category of performance, which includes acting alongside other ways in which people present themselves to others.)

Nevertheless, the political and social ideals that often motivated the radical theatres of the Vietnam War era cannot be reconciled with a postmodernist perspective on political art because the radical theatres remained committed to representing both the forces they opposed and the utopian society they hoped to bring into being. Postmodernist political art, by contrast, views all representations with suspicion – that suspicion is the actual subject of postmodernist political art, which tends to raise questions about the representations by which we are surrounded without positioning itself outside those representations or claiming to answer the questions it raises about them. The Wooster Group, which has been greatly influential on many experimental theatres arising during the 1980s and 1990s, may be the best example of postmodernist political performance.

NOTES

1. Michel Benamou, "Presence and Play," in Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (eds.) *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison, WI: Coda, 1977), p. 3.

2. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), p. xiv.

3. Elinor Fuchs, "The Death of Character," in Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 169–176.

4. Sam Shepard, *Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class and Other Plays* (New York: Urizen Books, 1976), p. 6.

5. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press; London: Verso, 1991), pp. 16–17.

6. Jeffrey M. Jones, *Der Inka Von Peru* in *7 Different Plays*, ed. M. Wellman (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1988), pp. 103–79; with "An Afterword" on pp. 437–40.

7. Don Shewey, "Not Either/Or But And: Fragmentation and Consolidation in the Post-Modern Theatre of Peter Sellars," in Bruce King (ed.), *Contemporary American Theatre* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 265.

8. Judith Malina and Julian Beck, *Paradise Now* (New York: Vintage, 1971), pp. 15–16.

9. Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified," trans. Terese Lyons, *Modern Drama* 25 (1982), p. 177.

10. Benamou, "Presence and Play," p. 3.

11. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 162.