

FIONA TEMPLETON

for CAA re moaning

I cannot let pass this invitation to speak specifically from the point of view of the performance artist making her work, without bringing up certain of the difficulties of the medium. The term "performance artist" in the 90's has a curious sound; is anyone *becoming* a performance artist these days? In the wake of the starry-eyed 80's, who now puts their body on the line for an art of the moment, that has never been fully legitimized by its cousins: theater, the visual arts, and dance? (I'm speaking specifically of the U.S. here; in Britain, "live art" is to some extent becoming theorized and archived.) And especially now that the individual artist of any form is marginalized, how can the performance artist survive in an evanescent form, up against a situation where those cousins whose work is also of time (dance and theater) are constituted on the other hand in the still-fundable group form? This is one of the forms where you have to sell your work before you can make it, yet there are no NEA production grants for individuals, and it costs us more to record our work on the precious but inappropriate videotape that we are judged by for future gigs, than we are likely to receive ourselves for presenting that work.

And yet from my point of view, this *is* the theater form of our time. Most currently theater resembles live film, and most playwrights are touting a screenplay or have one in the closet. Yet naturalism is only one of a myriad forms of performance possible; and it is in performance art not theater that most conceptualization of the ontology of the theater has recently been made.

Until John Jesurun recently received a MacArthur grant, he was having to work often reluctantly on commission as writer or director for other people's projects, not always as a peer or collaborator and not always in work that was even remotely comparable in quality to his own, unable to afford to make his own most of the time. Yet from *Chang in a Void Moon*, his unique ongoing serial work, to late works that have yet to be seen in his own country, his work has visibly influenced much contemporary theater.

Projects of the scale of my *YOU--The City* are not less saleable than many museum pieces, and I can say from experience, potentially no less popular than less heady fodder; but beyond its original sold-out run for which I had applied for three years for funding, it has never been taken on by a producer, even a not-for-profit one, in the U.S. There's of course the premiere-hungry presenting structure, but also a certain assumption that performance shouldn't cost much, and, biggest insult of all to a serious practitioner of almost 25 years, that marginalization equals amateurism. And with no object-product to sell and access to quality documentation, the form suffers most of all from a public media. Applications since then for far less complex projects have met with the response that panels have not thought that I could pull it off.

The form is too marginal still for teaching in most schools in the U.S., where if performance is taught at all it is mostly by teachers who already teach another form in which their expertise lies and who do not really practice it. Of course some teachers make performance, but scratch the situation to find the other form that has allowed them in. Not that my purpose is to claim for performance art a status as a form; I don't care much for naming of form as a useful inroad to what is interesting in a work. But the purist categories are over-invested in power structures, finances, real estate, pedagogy, etc. Specialization makes casualties of our public and our critical literature too: visual artists and dancers tend not to read or hear text in detail; dancers are impatient of pedestrian movement; poets suspect all but the text of providing a crutch and smokescreen for inadequate writing; theater people have skill to accord legitimacy to the non-representational, shocking though this would be in most other forms. Actually, theater is taught often in quite separate departments, from theoretical, literary, writing, and physical standpoints. And unfortunately, even our potentially radical ensembles mostly prefer now to deconstruct existing text rather than risk new writing.

In any case, theater, itself, in the U.S. has not quite been accepted as high art. We have no national theater, no New York Metropolitan Theater though we do have opera and ballet. Yes, there's Broadway. Theater is this land of Barnums versus puritans still is judged by what is known in Britain as BOS (bums [i.e. buns] on seats), and these are drawn largely by the actor's star system. And within theater itself, the invested hierarchies are perhaps the strongest of any art form; writers are not supposed to direct their work. And as for

set designers moving their own sets with the authority of a sculptor, it's against union rules. The places are simply not built for querying the role of the audience, or for suggesting multiple interpretation. The seating arrangement is still based on the single point of view where there was a "best seat", that of the Duke.

My work's original enabling context was that conceptual art of the late 60's and early 70's, together with reading and seeing Beckett at high school, reading Stein and Joyce there (and learning poetry by heart from an early age), and shortly after meeting Kanton, Grotowski, Carolee Scheemann, Joseph Beuys, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson. These were not learned as anomalies, but as high points, unlike how I encounter much of the normative or skills-based teaching of performance. Having said above that in Britain live art is theorized, I will also mention my wariness of teaching the examples of a new or radical area of art as if they were form in themselves, which only fossilizes the form, reintroduces correctness into an art of the question.

It has also been a problem of the form that in order to contain it rather than value it just as such an art of the question, there have been many impulses from outside as well as unfortunately from inside (small territory, or divide and rule?) to define and name it, to close the doors on it. It was 10 minutes long and it had no text, no set, it used microphones, it could be done in a bar, it had no beginnings and ends, it was personal, it did not represent. All contradictory, all closure. Art is to be perceived in its reach.

Of course this is part of the problem, in current politics of art. Before the major slashes at the NEA, the InterArts panel was disbanded. The Visual Arts panel, which had a new genres category from which I once received funding before the institution of the InterArts panel, informed me that my work was not eligible as it was not primarily visual. Tell that to the conceptualists. Next went the individual special projects at the theater panel. And then of course, as did artists in other categories, I received my application for solo work back in the mail. Individual artists were out. But it had started with those areas that were not to be contained; that was really the sign that the very making of art was to come before the censorship of means.

Well, I have to go to my job at the hospital now. There, though I've told them I'm a writer and a director, I am asked (because I'm a woman, or because such an authoritative position as a director ought to have a job) they ask me "How's the acting?" (Poor Fiona, she never can seem to get any parts; she can't be very good.)

Fiona Templeton

Summer 1996