

# PRELUDE.08

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## BETWEEN THE BLACK BOX AND THE WHITE CUBE

**Morgan Von Prella Pecelli, PRELUDE 08 dramaturg**

What can an anthropologist say in few pages about an issue that has plagued the fields of theater, performance, performance art and their scholarly counterparts for more than a century? Particularly a decade after we began living in a "post-theatrical, post-anthropological age"?<sup>(1)</sup> Likely, not much you don't all already know about yourselves. The debate the curators are trying to trigger about place is not necessarily a new one. However, as New York City experiences a growing exodus of artists to places like Berlin and Philadelphia, and as a number of our lobbying groups and service organizations are working on our behalf with city officials to obtain "affordable performance and development" spaces, it seems particularly relevant to revisit the question: How do New York City performing artists, producers, and curators respond to the places they call their creative homes, i.e. the theatrical black boxes, the museum's white cubes and all the grey spots in between?

In 1849, Richard Wagner wrote "The Art-Work of the Future" and handed modern art a challenge: to find its way back from "an egoistic, self-concerning business"<sup>(2)</sup> to a common public endeavor deeply connected to life and offered up his theatrical Gesamtkuntzwerk (total artwork) as possible solution. 150 years later, in 1999, an article titled "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century" advised something in a similar vein: museums should "engage actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives."<sup>(3)</sup> During the 15 decades between these two articles, artists struggled with the challenge not just of reaching out to diverse and wide-ranging communities but also of doing so from within the confines and the limitations of institutional theaters and museums that predominantly reproduced traditional western societal and political hegemonic norms. Artists working against those entrenched values had to break out of the black box and the white cube, taking their work to the streets, private homes, bars, and other such alternative venues in order to reach not simply their niche audiences, but also that elusive "common public".

The theatrical work of the surrealists and symbolists, including Artaud's "Theater and Its Double," would appear to have posed the first real challenge to western theater's dramatic foundations. As the trigger for a revolt not simply against the aesthetic form, but also against the ideological and social legacies that the "theater" as a place – as an institution – represented, some have pointed to Alfred Jarry's first showing of Ubu Roi and to his 1896 publication of "The Uselessness of Theater to/in the Theater" in which he not only took aim at the audience's desire to sit silently in the dark and be entertained, but also with their desire for "realistic" visions of their daily lives. However, it could be argued that the Dadaists and Futurists, many of

whom came from the visual, plastic and poetic art worlds, with their revolutionary performances, really ushered in the "demise" of theater as anything other than affirmation of the dominant cultural and political sensibilities.

By the 1970s and '80s, revolutionary performance forms that followed in those early footsteps were finally accepted into the very institutions they were meant to defy, and performance art became an integral part of curation for the Art World. (4) By introducing theatricality, particularly the live performance form, into the "white cube," curators challenged many of the foundational tenets of their museums and galleries. Rather than merely replacing the "white cube" with the "black box," (5) this shift introduced to the museum/gallery a whole other mode of interacting with the audience. First, watchers of performance become participants in meaning-making, a novel experience for the modern viewer of art, who had grown used to being confronted with an object, the meaning of which was supposed to be complete and transparent with or without the viewer. (6) Second, the ephemerality of the "Live" questions the nature of artifact and memory inherent to the purpose of the museum. No longer a home simply for historically relevant art objects, by including live performance the museum could catch in its grasp the "present" as well. Third, the lack of a legal mechanism by which a performance may be owned or traded also creates an unsettling possibility for galleries whose purpose is to 'sell' things. Theater in the museum and gallery setting becomes a kind of "non-collectable art" and becomes highly valued precisely for its impermanence. In these ways, the showing of live performance becomes an ideological subversion of authority, of 'ownership society,' of capitalism, and even of the commodity fetish. During the past 50 years, museums have been fighting reputations as "institutions" that reproduce national identity, stoke capitalist market greed, and promote a kind of stagnant culture. Live performance has offered them a way to hook into the post-modern ephemerality of the "Live," the hunger for experiences, and other such things for which our schizophrenic post-Delueze/Guattarian YoCo ("Young Cosmopolitan") audiences are searching – and for which they are willing to shell out time and money.

The exchange between the American avant-garde theater movements and performance art over the last 40 years has generated a plethora of rich and diverse theater, performance, curation, and scholarship, as well as new understandings of place. Perhaps the question still up in the air is: why hasn't the "THEATER" caught on? Or has it, perhaps, but the general public just has not noticed? Why has it been relegated to the status of "irrelevant entertainment" and how did it let itself become "a place where serious debate and subversive discourse no longer happens"? While many self-described 'theater companies' may have caught on, why do the institutions themselves and the audiences they serve seem to remain lodged in the 19th century, making dramatic spectacles? Place and particularly the institutions embodied through these architectural monuments continue to play a critical role in how performance is presented to and valued by the public. Can the theatrical box be salvaged? Should it be? Or should we simply claim the term "performance" for all theatrical work that abandoned the dramatic- naturalistic-entertainment foundation, and move on? Should we concede the term "theater," in the end, to the "post-theatrical" age?

The works of the artists show-cased in this festival draw on this legacy of 160 years of struggle to change what a "theater" is and what a "museum" can exhibit. Over the four-day festival we ask them to consider how the places where they make their work have affected not simply what they make, but how they make it. We ask them how new technologies that incorporate virtual spaces and virtual audiences influence how they use the performative place. But we also ask them to imagine, in this 21st century,

where theater and performance will go and how we can convince the audiences follow. As one of the curators stated, "Do we change 'theater' to accommodate contemporary audiences' interactive habits? Or do we change the proposition of what is expected 'in the theater' – the actual four walls?"

(1)Phelan, Peggy, *The Ends of Performance*. 1998, p5.

(2)Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*. 1849, p75.

(3)Harold Skramstad, in *Daedalus*; Summer 1999; 128, 3, p128

(4)Goldberg, RoseLee, *Performance Art*, 2000.

(5)Manuel J. Borja-Villel, "A Theater Without Theater: The Place of the Subject", in *A Theater without Theater*, 2007, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

(6)Manuel J. Borja-Villel, "A Theater Without Theater: The Place of the Subject", in *A Theater without Theater*, 2007, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

In preparation for these framing remarks, I asked the curators and artists three questions, and I think some of the answers were, to say the least, worth sharing. To close the frame here, I let their words speak for themselves:

### **What Is The Difference Between On The One Hand Theater And On The Other Performance Art Or Installation/visual/plastic Art?**

"There is no difference, all art is created to be seen, to project something onto the world where there was nothing before."

"I think of performance art as more expansive, blurring the parameters between art forms and disciplines, altering space for the artist and audience. But more and more...theater forms and conventions are happily fracturing"

"More often than not, the difference between these genres is one of framework, of context, rather than content or even form. The theater has been dominated for centuries by an urge to tell stories, to represent, to use language. Conversely, the history of performance within a visual arts context is one of body-based, non-representational art... But today, these two histories are meeting; the gene pool is mixing."

"The difference is the impact of experiencing the work over a fixed period of time. Speaking generally, every piece of theater has a beginning, middle and an end. There is a contract unconsciously agreed upon between artist and audience as to the duration of time necessary for properly viewing the work. This arch of time becomes the framework within which all other choices are made. The theater artist counts on this period of captured attention to structure his work. Likewise, the gallery artist must consider how to make fully expressed statements without this guarantee of time."

"I perceive very little difference between these forms. The difference that DOES exist seems to come from the difference in how the forms are received. Installation/visual/plastic art seems to be considered sophisticated, intellectually rigorous, high brow, etc. Now, of course, there are bad things that go along with this perception. The spaces where installation/visual/plastic arts are shown seem to be more elitist, and require all sorts of strategies to invite encourage attendance and discourse. Free nights, programs like First Saturdays., etc have been devised to open these places up to more folks and to engage with the neighborhoods in which they exist. Theatre, on the other hand, perhaps because of its being tied up with entertainment, seems to be perceived as less than. Maybe that is what is so distressing about the rising prices of theatre tickets. Something that is perceived as being for everyone and not some cultural elite, [is now] carrying higher and higher ticket prices, [and may start] to alienate it's audiences, [and] distance itself from the neighborhoods where it resides."

"Performance is contextualizing a live event in a way that says it isn't normal reality...Theater is a form that can be art that uses performance as a medium. Theater can [also] be entertainment.... What is this difference between entertainment and art?...Entertainment sets out to meet or exceed your expectations in terms of gratification...you know what the psychological and

emotional transaction is with entertainment...it's a very clear tangible deliverable, it can be rated and qualitatively judged based on its ability to deliver what it promises. Art on the other hand creates a space for ambiguity and ambivalence and questions. Ultimately the point is to create questions, to create discomfort and to investigate...Contextualizing theater as art, you remove the expectation that it is conventional entertainment."

### **Why Do You Choose To Make Your Works In The Theatrical Context As Opposed To The Museum Context? (Is It A Choice?)**

"I love theater. I started, like most people, with Shakespeare and musicals and what was available to me. I love theater. I love the process of making it. I love the experience of being the audience. I love listening to language. I love being moved emotionally. I love that experience of being in a room with other people and sharing it....It's not a choice. It's what I like."

"It's not a choice, it's born out of necessity ... I [can only] speak the language of staging, of composition in 3-dimensional space and of the musicality of emotion."

"It's not a choice so much as a soil, you grow in the soil you're in."

"I do shows where ever I can find people who want to put them on."

"I make my work any way I possibly can. But I am extremely interested in the possibilities for collective response/action that live audiences provide."

"Museums strike me as mausoleums. They are places to pay homage to the past. Theater happens now."

"Of course it's a choice. As artists we are in complete command of the framework for our work. And if we fail to maintain that control, then others will surely take the opportunity to do it for us."

"I try to think about theatrical venues as rooms instead of stages. The word "room" helps me to think about the encounter with the audience included and equal... I wish all theater would leave theaters."

"In the beginning of my career, I worked exclusively as a theatre artist. I never considered work outside that context because I had no training in any other medium. Also, I never would have considered the museum/gallery space as a viable place for my work based on that lack of training and also, they seemed such closed environments. It all seemed so specialized. Since moving to New York, however, and seeing how difficult it was to get work in the theatre, work I wanted to do, anyway, work in the visual arts became more attractive. Working within it, I have found more and more folks from disparate disciplines working as masters of their own fate. There's a freedom that I have found in empowering myself to create work rooted in theatre practice, but not bound by theatre space. I have worked much more and been far more creatively fulfilled than I was when I chased the carrot of venue, producer, etc."

### **If You Have Made Works For Museums, Or Site-specific Contexts, How Was That Experience Different From When You Produced In A Theatrical Venue?**

"A venue is just a place. A piece of theater is no more or less a piece of theater because of where it is performed. It is all about the structure and framing of the event...the temporal nature of how the audience experiences the work."

"Installations often offer more one on one experiences. Theaters provide a living breathing community, even if only for a couple of hours."

"I think every show you make is site-specific because there's a big difference between doing a show [in one place] as opposed to [another], just in terms of the space, the dimensions, the dynamic, even the working dynamic and the place's relationship with and identity in the world. Museums obviously are places with inherent codifying attributes, so to do a show there feels maybe more momentous, both to you doing the show and maybe to the audience, despite post-modernity's wish to de-centralize that power. But in a nuts and bolts way, little difference."

"The theater has existed within a framework of entertainment and populism for centuries. Art has institutionalized itself to such a degree that one could argue it has completely divorced itself from these concerns. On the one hand this produces a fantastically rich, academically-enhanced discourse around artistic production. On the other hand, this distancing from "the people" has allowed for so much artistic production to slip into solipsism. Artists in both traditions are addressing this concern. But to the extent that the theater continues to be stewarded by a majority of commercially-minded entertainment impresarios, much of art continues to be maintained by curators and gallerists who care little for these concerns around the general public's access to the work."

"It seems that when theatre is de-formalized, or taken out of its traditional "space", the audience acts in unpredictable ways, choosing to participate, with usually exciting results. It is obviously of benefit to be able to control the whole event in a theatre, using lights, sound and other technical tricks to manipulate an audience, but there is something so fundamentally important and intriguing about performance when that potentially dangerous, uncontrollable element is added."

"The term theater has many different definitions and it feels tied to a market. Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, regional etc. ... I think the folks who are out there mixing it up are not finding "success" because their work does not fit the market. I'd argue that the market is too closed and that those folks would do well to take a look at the museum/gallery space."

"The principle difference is that a gallery is a showroom. In the business of selling... a museum is in the business of "branding" or adding value to a work/artist, etc... I think of theatre as more of a marketplace with a tangible exchange. You buy a ticket. You expect to get what you paid for."

"A theater is where you go sit in the dark and watch something happen on a stage. A museum is where you go look at artifacts from a different era or objects created by other people to exist to be looked at and evaluated and judged and you are to be told why they are valuable. Performance that happens in a site-specific sort of way seems to be the beginning of a questioning of those models...A museum is a place sacred to the muses, so I actually feel like a museum could be a theater, a performance space, anything really...What we probably need to do, is really stop doing experimental theater in theaters. I'd put it in a museum. Just don't call it theater anymore. Educate audiences, reach out to visual art audiences, give people the tools to look at art performance in the same way they look at visual art."

"I recently heard a figure that in terms of video art, a museum/gallery goer is likely to spend about 20 seconds viewing the work. That's a pretty staggering figure on many levels. What both museums/galleries and theatres seem to be moving toward is what I call the "mac store" model. We've all been there (I think). Whenever I go I'm always amazed at the number of different audiences they are able to serve... It's a bit of a utopian kind of thing in the way that I'm characterizing it, but you can see the theatre and museum both making moves in this direction. Think of the number of theatres that have been opening cafes lately or the whole "late night" series thing that goes on in... It's all about traffic. If you can get a bunch of folks into your spaces and give them a reason to hang out for a bit, you can turn whatever the location into a destination."

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