

**“The ‘Left’s’ constant critique of ‘the State’ can end up unwittingly colluding with conservative neoliberal models.”**

Shannon Jackson on Art, Politics and Labour.

Karel Vanhaesebrouck and Nele Wynants

The fourth edition of the Brussels festival *Performatik* (2015) opened with a panel discussion between Shannon Jackson (professor theatre, dance and performance studies at UC-Berkeley) and Hendrik Folkerts (curator Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam). The specific interaction between the performing arts and visual art was at the very heart of this so-called “Brussels biennial of performance art”, an initiative of the renowned Kaaithheater in association with a dozen cultural organizations such as Beursschouwburg, Bozar, Passa Porta & WIELS, to name but a few.<sup>1</sup> All artists invited playfully explored and revised the codes, conventions and expectations of the world of performance and visual art. Choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, for instance, undertook the challenge to rethink her own dance work in *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, a choreographic exhibition in WIELS. Visual artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx made a reverse move. Drawing from her vast archive, she created a four-hour ‘all-round show’ entitled *“THAT’s IT!” (+3 FREE minutes)*. Formally speaking, the resulting artworks did not belong exclusively to either artistic domain.

Karel Van Haesebrouck and Nele Wynants took this opportunity to engage in a conversation with Shannon Jackson about her recent book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*.<sup>2</sup> In this publication Jackson offers an interdisciplinary approach to the recent return to socially engaged art in both contemporary performance and visual art. Social art practice is often collaborative and involves people as the medium of the work. At a time when art world critics and curators heavily debate the social, and when community organizers and civic activists are reconsidering the role of aesthetics in social reform, this book tackles some of the contradictions and competing stakes of contemporary experimental art-making.

*We have read your book Social Works and you were invited to participate in Performatik, the Brussels biennial of performance art, a festival that focuses on the crossovers between visual art and performance art. To what extent do both of your interests overlap?*

SJ: One ‘big bucket’ of my research interest is in the domain of inter-art

collaboration. The second ‘bucket’ is about art and social change – what is the role of art in the public realm and art movements for social justice? My interest is in exploring projects that allow for some kind of questioning of conventional models of activist art. More particularly, I am thinking about what kind of politically engaged art is adequate to a 21st century moment when the politics around economies and governance are changing radically. In my book *Social Works* I tried to find projects that allowed me think about the questions in both of these ‘buckets.’ In performing art communities and in visual art communities, there are sometimes parallel conversations about political activism: in both cases, issues of social justice have gained in importance, not only as a vehicle for reflection, but also as true engine for artistic practice itself. But visual art worlds and performing art worlds aren’t always working together. I was trying to stimulate an inter-art conversation and an art and social change conversation at the same time.

*The discourses on what the ethics of an artist should be are very different in these fields. The word commitment means something different to a visual artist than to someone working in community arts.*

SJ: Absolutely. Certainly in the Anglophone world, words like commitment, community art, and socially-engaged art mean something different to visual artists than to performing artists. Perhaps it has something to do with the nature of the form. Arguably, in the world of performing arts, it’s a shorter step to participation. Meanwhile, others see the performing arts as something that can be instrumentalized more easily in a social program. In the United States, our National Endowment for the Arts doesn’t have nearly the amount of arts funding that a European art council does, but it is still interesting to think about how our N.E.A. legitimated public art funding. The N.E.A.’s most recent director, Rocco Landesman, was a theatre producer who argued that art is a vitalizer of neighbourhoods in establishing “Our Town” funding programs; he talked about art as something that addresses economic questions in his Art Works funding programs. That is one example of the US “community art” focus.

*Is there a danger in this government-driven social take on art? These practices tend to obscure societal problems. Sometimes they function as a sort of lubricant.*

SJ: I think that there’s a certain kind of argument that would say yes. That is a danger of instrumentalization. The channeling of art in the service of social good obscures allegiances with a neoliberal economic market or urban planning. There

are definitely many situations where the commissioning body or the civic agency has decided ahead of time what the outcome should be, and they are deploying artists to achieve that. Whether it is this social art practice category that you have here in Belgium, the highly outcome driven cultural industry discourse in the United Kingdom, or the so-called place-making discourse in the United States, stakeholders often have a pre-determined notion about what a good society looks like. Of course, we know that this is a danger; Adorno's classic argument about the dangers of "committed" art is still relevant. However, I also think that this critique of instrumentalization—the one I just outlined above—has also become normalized. It is a critique that has become reflex. Can we force ourselves to go a level deeper?

I think that there is a kind of easy, knee-jerk, and familiarly modernist ethos about the critique of instrumentalization. Couching the critique in Adorno's terms every time, makes us not notice the complexity of the situation. That is why I often feel the necessity of going inside each single case deeply every time; we need to take time to track the ways a civic discourse or state operations structure the production of art work in different contexts. Various practices have a variety of effects. Some art projects might actually be unsettling some of the instrumentalized parameters of the organizations from whom they accepted the funding. Every project that has been supported by the State or public sector does not inevitably have the same kind of instrumentalized effect. That's a pre-determined argument, and it is a lazy one.

As somebody from the US, I have reasons to be more suspicious of this critique about the "instrumentalization of the state". If the risks of "committed" art are partly associated with state intrusion, that European "tendency" will be less and less relevant in a situation where state supported structures are eroding. As somebody who comes from a country where there is no or little state support for cultural practice (or much of state support for anything: education, social welfare, housing, health), I have to ask anti-state critics to be careful what they wish for. The Left's constant critique of "the State" can end up unwittingly colluding with conservative neoliberal models. In the U.S, Tea Party activists, libertarians, and other neoliberal politicians are more than happy to hear citizens criticizing the state.

### **The artist as a post-Fordist laborer?**

*Would it be exaggerated to claim that the avant-garde or modernist conception of art functioned as a laboratory for the post-Fordist economy of today, with its values of flexibility and creativity?*

SJ: Indeed, that corresponds with my view of what is going on. We are in a situation where there is less and less emphasis on security and safety. There is a whole lot more value placed on flexibility and so-called freedom: out-of-the-box thinking, perpetual experimentation, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship... All those values can be wonderful for artists, community organizations, and local citizens. But they can also have very mixed effects. The celebration of flexible work can contribute to the erosion of consistent work. What you call a laboratory is a laboratory in both productive and pernicious senses of the word. On the one hand, you could say that artists are in the vanguard for figuring out how to live in such a flexible society. There is a reason why artists and creative people are held up as models of the new global citizenship. On the other hand, the rush to flexibility in what Ulrich Beck calls “the risk society” contributes to the erosion of social democratic models. So the artistic laboratory is a place of investigation in a creative economy, but it can be a symptom, and victim, of the unintended effects of the creative economy as well.

*In her book on performance arts Rosemary Goldberg explains that one of the main characteristics of, what could be described as the early post-modern generation – she refers for instance to Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (ATDK) – is the specific relation/balance they have between life and work. According to her, the dynamic was related to the fact that these people in New York and Brussels worked in the places where they lived. These contemporary artists are the perfect post-Fordist laborers. They invented a model that was later adopted or integrated by the overall economy. Do you think that this is an exaggerated argument?*

SJ: Brian Holmes makes a similar argument. Initially, it feels fairly affirming to see an “artistic” way of life celebrated and fêted. At the same time, we didn’t see our own collusion with a post-Fordist economic transition. I find that a really compelling argument. Of course, this kind of post-Fordist critique is becoming quite familiar as well. It could become the new Adorno position: the new overstated or routinely stated position that doesn’t notice how some artists are developing new ways of living and working that maintain an allegiance to values of security and equitable labor. ATDK is a good example of somebody who might be developing an alternate, post-Fordist model of living and working as an artist. She is a renowned artist with an individual signature, but she also has a reputation for maintaining the health of her dancers and for not accepting any kind of commission or touring schedule that doesn’t pay them adequately. She has a reputation for protecting them from the worst effects of a risk society in the

arts.

*She is also in a good position to do that, and her reputation is the post-Fordist product par excellence. That is the paradox.*

SJ: It is indeed, and it's inevitably the situation that all these artists are in. Everyone is learning how to become a mixed media artist in a mixed economy. There is not going to be a clear and pure way of navigating this territory or a clear and pure way of criticizing those who inhabit this territory. I think it really is genuinely a paradoxically mixed moment, and like all of us, she is trying to figure out how to connect the dots in a different way. There is no pure position within it.

*This also responds to a very romantic conception of the artist who offers his or her life for the art or for the community to live his or her art.*

SJ: There are different things that people are romantic about: One is the individual artist who produces her art form without concern for what anybody says. And there's a different kind of romance of the artist who gives to the community. These and other romantic images of artists can over-determine our reaction to a situation, and we just need to be cognizant of which one is operating in the context you're working in....

### **Performance art, style and craftsmanship**

*In his Empty Space, Peter Brooks pokes fun at the happening. He describes the happening as a promising way out of the production logic and also a new way of creating a holy event in a society that has been de-ritualized. He also describes how the happening quickly became a format, and he gives a list of typical happening actions and props: the use of flower, blood, toilet paper, etc. These practices developed even in a kind of style. Is that one of the basic consequences of not being able to escape the system you're in?*

SJ: When I teach Allan Kaprow now, I feel continually re-amazed about how precise he was about the need to undo the formal and aesthetic parameters he was inheriting. That artistic precision is something to remember in these conversations, in new experiments. What the imitators remember is not the precision of the pursuit but the documentation of its effects. The sweeping or the toilet paper or the tires... Let's remember that they were really embedded in an effort to rethink what a painting was. If all you remember is the sweeping itself

rather than the formal pursuit, then it can become a style or a fad. Pale imitators will decide to reproduce those techniques without thinking more deeply about the formal pursuit. Now we have to ask ourselves, how can we adapt Kaprow's goals for our time? Oddly enough, in our time, the happening, or certain stylistic conventions of the "holy" happening, have become codified and been introduced into all kinds of contexts as the new compulsion, the new rave, the new "participation," the new post-Fordist "service." So the happening has become the new inherited convention. So what do we do now? How do we disrupt the codification of disruption?

*This brings us to a term that is not often used in these kinds of discussions: craftsmanship. Performance art (in the narrow sense) is often associated with the structural absence of craftsmanship. How does it relate to Kaprow? Is the work of Kaprow the result of a very specific type of self-conscious craftsmanship?*

SJ: I will try to answer your question with an example: it is interesting to think about Yvonne Rainer who became known, for better and for worse, for her manifesto on saying "No to spectacle." She was trying to resist a certain model of virtuosity – of craftsmanship – that was appropriate to its time; it was as a mode of interrogating and questioning the parameters of the dance form. Later, however, she found it necessary to revise that manifesto, because its prescriptions had become routinized, reflex, habit, a new convention. Much like the Kaprow, viewers knew they were watching the avant-garde when the dancer was walking not dancing, when they saw a dancer in street clothes rather a lyotard. Certain things become stylized; certain moves start to become stylized that forget their connection to the formal pursuit.

To bring this back to ATKM and Work/Travail/Arbeid in Wiels during Performatik, it was interesting that we found ourselves in casual proximity with dancers who weren't afraid to display choreographic craftsmanship. There was an everydayness to the space of the gallery, and, at the same moment, we were right next to dancers who were dancing with skill and a high degree of virtuosity. So we could say that the work is in conversation with "performance art" (in the narrow sense) to use your words, in the structural absence of stylized display. At the same time, I was standing next to somebody who was dancing with incredible strength, next to somebody who could jump incredibly high. It seemed to be a meditation on craftsmanship, on what it might mean to say "no" and "yes" to spectacle at once.

*During Performatik the crossover between performing arts and visual arts was one of the central objects of reflexion. Institutions such as MOMA, Centre Pompidou and Tate Modern all create spaces for performing arts, and theaters are commissioning visual artists today. Why all of a sudden is this mutual interest so vivid? And is it überhaupt new? Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century a lot of artists already crossed disciplinary boundaries.*

SJ: From the perspective of the artist, from the perspective of the people who write the histories of performing arts and visual arts, these hybrid experiments are a constant motif in the history of 20th century art movement – whether we are talking about the Surrealists or the experimenters of the 1960s. What seems different to me now is that institutions are institutionalizing these hybrid practices. Of course, decades ago, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted musicians and dancers. And MOMA curators invited Steve Paxton to dance in its courtyard. What is different today is that institutions seem to be changing internally in order to curate this work more consistently, rather than as a kind of novelty. Along with that, I also think that there is more interest in the discrete traditions of each form – the specific traditions of painting or of dance. Siting a performance artist in the museum gallery is slightly different than siting a choreographer in the museum gallery. It becomes an opportunity, not necessarily to create a new merged form, but to stage a conversation across art forms.

*Does it relate to the new curatorial practice?*

SJ: In terms of the history of curating, within the visual art sector Harald Szeemann is often touted as the figure who launched a more expanded form of curating. Then of course people question that marking. But if you go with that, you could say that the rise of the curator as the new artist is one contributing factor to this inter-art situation.

*The curator is the flex-worker par excellence, moving between institutions, constantly scouting for opportunities.*

SJ: It's interesting though to think of how this flex-worker model interacts with institutions where there seems to be more and more commitment architecturally, infrastructurally to expanded curating. Museums are changing their buildings. That doesn't seem all that flexible. In general it's more about trying to figure out how to create spaces to allow that flex, for good and for bad.

*Does this relate to what you have called the ‘experiential turn’ - the turn to the experiential, the event, to the encounter, to process, and to reciprocal interactions with spectators not only in arts but also in economy and business school models? Is this another link between the neoliberal logic and performance art?*

SJ: I’ll answer this in relation to your earlier question: why is it happening now? The new curatorial practice is one element. Another answer to that question about the “performative” in art is that it is both a post-Fordist symptom and a post-Fordist propeller. Just to rehearse the argument: if a Fordist model is about producing objects and commodities that are concrete and something you can point to, the post-Fordist model is about producing services and encounters and experiences. It is dependent upon immaterial labor to produce immaterial experiences. There is a pretty neat and clean quality to that argument, but there is one important thing to consider when asking why institutions are institutionalizing in this way. If this is the new direction of the contemporary museum, it affects everything about the museum’s operations: it is open more hours a day. The curators are not only expected to hang objects on the wall, but to produce experiences in the total environment. So the curating of performance seems like a helpful set of techniques; it provides a new toolkit to create these kinds of open experiences. Of course, here we have another argument that is becoming routinized. Some curators are quite concerned about this move, and some artists are feeling displaced by it. Amid those feelings of concern and displacement, many will now criticize “the performing arts” as a post-Fordist tool, one that is colluding with the latest iteration of neoliberal capitalism. Like any of these arguments that we’ve been talking about, it’s important to consider. At the same time, it can become a critical habit. If we become too attached to any one form of critique, we won’t be able to notice the various effects of various projects. There are no clear good guys or clear bad guys in these impure and complicated situations.

### **Brecht as a way out?**

*A specific and somewhat surprising reference in your book is Brecht, a name often forgotten in these kinds of debates. Why is he such an important reference to you?*

SJ: A lot of the cases in *Social Works* are artists and artworks that would be placed in a more expanded visual art mode rather than an expanded performing arts mode. I thought it would be an interested exercise to bring a theatre figure to this expanded visual art discourse. So partly it was to force an inter-art conversation.



The other element for me, irrespective of whether it is visual art or theatre or dance, was to foreground the helpfulness of a certain strain of Brechtian thinking for our contemporary moment. It has to do with the capacity of art forms to investigate the apparatus that ‘supports’ them. In translation into English, Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* often gets translated as ‘alienation,’ ‘distancing.’ However, I am most interested in how the formal challenge of his techniques, particularly his interest in exposing the artwork’s dependence upon an aesthetic apparatus of support. That aesthetic exposure underpinned Brecht’s social politics of exposure; all of us as citizens are dependent upon a social apparatus of support. That’s interesting to remember today – at a time when social systems of support are eroding, in the United States or nearly everywhere. It seems important to develop aesthetic practices that bring that interdependence to consciousness again. It seems like an important challenge and an important pursuit, both formally and socially. What I aimed for was a kind of post-Brechtian Brechtianism, a way of taking that element of his thinking and flipping it to address 21st century context.

*Would his relevance then be that he offers us instruments to show us that our given reality which presents itself as a neutral, objective logic is not a given?*

SJ: Yes, to show that our reality is contingent and constructed rather than neutral. Even the contemporary desires to live lives that are flexible, individuated, privatized, and free of structure are, in fact, dependent upon a structure.

*Is it also a critique? Does the Brecht aesthetics also offer instruments to criticize a world or a situation that thinks of itself as a necessity?*

SJ: An adapted version of Brechtian aesthetics and an altered understanding of what the politics are, yes, I think it does. It is an important resource to remember. In thinking about how to do that now, I don’t always believe that the same “Brechtian” techniques will work, just as Kaprow’s sweeping may not work now. So it’s akin to what we were saying before about the stylization of a method; we don’t want to reproduce the effects but understand instead the primary formal and social impulse. For Brecht in his time, for example, the “interruption of a scene” would produce critical consciousness, or the juxtaposition of the dramatic moment with didactic titles could provoke critical reflection. In a contemporary world of constant interruption and distraction, those are techniques and styles that are not adequate to our situation. So we have to find new ways to historicize our own present. What would it mean to inhabit a space of ambiguity now when

the parameters of identification and distancing are different?

*Wouldn't it be a bit out of tune in our post-ideological times? He is a very explicit ideological thinker. Or is that exactly his relevance today?*

SJ: There are many Brechts. I don't think we need a new didacticism or something like that. Brecht wasn't always consistent in his ideology. He sometimes changed his position around the role of emotion and affect. He himself was also in a paradoxical position as a state-supported artist, then a Hollywood-supported artist. The ambiguity of his position in a changing economic and political landscape is probably even more relevant today.

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<sup>1</sup> Performatik 2015 was a collaboration between Kaaitheater, Argos centre for art and media, Beursschouwburg, Bozar, CENTRALE for Contemporary Art, Don Verboven Exquisite Objects, Passa Porta, Q-O2, WIELS, workspacebrussels & ZSenne art lab. Parallel to the artistic program, a series of salons were organised in which artists, curators and critics were invited to reflect on different questions related to this interdisciplinary dialogue in an informal round table conversation. The Performatik Salons 2015 were organised in association with The Research Centre for Visual Poetics (University of Antwerp), RESIC & MUCIA (Université Libre de Bruxelles), Contemporary Art Heritage Flanders (CAHF) & Performatik Partners.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Jackson. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.