

Book Review

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Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, ISBN 978-0-415-40442-6, Price N/A, pp. 260

In *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Rebecca Schneider manages to present a compelling argument about what she sees as the often misunderstood and misrepresented nature of theatrical performance, which includes its quality of ephemerality, temporality and a tendency to disappear once it is done. Schneider singles out Richard Schechner's 1965 study, in which he differentiates between drama and performance as being between 'permanence' and 'ephemerality', as a text which has helped to cement this view of performance. Schneider suggests that 'the idea of the ephemeral has enjoyed a certain constitutive status in performance studies', and how we think of performance, for much of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries (p.94). As she claims, her book thus focuses on 'the tangle of explicit theatricality and time' as well as on 'the warp and draw of one time in another time'; in doing so, the book vigorously 'troubles the prevalence of presentism, immediacy and linear time in most thinking about live performance'. (p. 6)

In a book of seven essays - made up of a Foreword, five chapters and an Afterword - Schneider assembles a persuasive array of examples drawn from a range of performances such as American Civil War reenactments, the live art performances of Allison Smith and Marina Abramovic, and the 'America' plays of Linda Mussmann and Suzan-Lori Parks. The discussion then proceeds to draw on a range of critical and theoretical standpoints - performance theory, anthropology, cultural studies, critical theory, visual arts, postcolonial theory by writers and

critics which include Schechner, Victor Turner, Raymond Williams, Toni Morrison, Homi Bhabha, Elizabeth Freeman, Theodor Adorno and Marvin Carlson, and many others.

In Chapter One, 'Reenactment and Relative Pain', Schneider addresses the question of why the American Civil War is still re-enacted after so many years. She suggests that the answer could be found in the words of one of the re-enactors, Chuck Woodhead, who claims: 'The Civil War isn't over, and that's why we fight. We fight to keep the past alive'. (p. 32) Schneider feels that by this statement, Woodhead roundly contradicts the dominant notion of performance as that which disappears for, in this case, performance (i.e., the war re-enactments) ironically ensures that history (the past) does not disappear, specifically because of its 'temporary return' and re-return. Chapter Two, 'Finding Faux Fathers', uses Musmann's *Cross Way Cross* and Parks' *The American Play* – both plays re-stage the assassination of Abraham Lincoln - to examine how theatre often negotiates as well as interrogates the 'cross' between the 'so-called present and the so-called past'. Schneider argues that both plays:

engage with history through the body of the surrogate rendered explicit as faux, as double, as second, as copy. Both engage an actor as passing and not passing as the Re-Founding Father, re-making the re-founder re-pass away.

(p. 64)

The chapter thus asks crucial questions such as: when does the theatre/performance cease to be theatre/performance? When does the word to 'act' which is at the heart of performance cross from being 'feigning' to becoming 'doing'? (p. 61)

In Chapter 3, 'In the Meantime: Performance Remains', which focuses on the issue of whether or not performance remains or disappears, Schneider questions 'several basic tenets of performance studies; first, that performance disappears and text remains; second, that live performance is not recording; and third, that the live takes place in a 'now' understood as singular, immediate, and vanishing'.(p. 87) Other questions posed by Schneider in this chapter include whether performance scholars, by always approaching performance as something that 'vanishes', limit themselves to an 'understanding of performance predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified...logic of the archive?' (p. 97)

The archive has long been habitual to Western culture. We understand ourselves relative to the remains we accumulate as indices of vanish-

ment, the tracks we house, mark, and cite, the material traces we acknowledge as remaining.

(p. 97)

Schneider's argument then is that reading performance as that which refuses to remain totally ignores the fact that much late twentieth-century and early twenty-first live art and live performance have become chief mediums through which history has been explored by artists. The logic of the archive, the book argues, is predicated on the notion and fact of documentability, whereas performance as that which disappears resists and in fact, challenges 'object status' as well as refusing 'the archive its privileged "saveable" original'. (p. 98) The chapter concludes by asking whether 'in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain...we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently...' (p. 98)

Chapter 4, 'Poor Poor Theatre', looks at Elizabeth LeCompte's Wooster Group's 2004 production, *Poor Theatre*, which was a direct citation of, and homage to Grotowski's 1965 production, *Akropolis*. LeCompte in her programme notes claimed that *Poor Theatre* was 'aimed at her ancestors' and that 'it was a personal question between me and them'. This, asserts Schneider, demonstrates the ways in which art practices (including theatre) 'can be conversations across time and can contain energies we might align with historical reenactments'. (p. 111) However, the author goes on to point out that the Wooster Group's piece contained, among its many other copying and cloning – such as the tiniest details of the acting and mannerisms of the Laboratorium Theatre actors, but 'without attention to replica costume and make-up' - an exact replica of the last twenty minutes of Grotowski's play. But Schneider explains that 'watching the labor of *exact* replication from the audience' however, demonstrated how the more the Wooster actors got the re-enactment exactly right the more uncannily *wrong* it felt, leading to what she refers to as that 'sincerity that rings of drag, of camp aesthetic, and the essential threat of the double'.

For, as in camp performance generally, that which is gotten slightly wrong in the effort to get something right, is precisely the space where difference is unleashed as critical homage.

(p. 112)

Further, the chapter suggests that the surrogacy upon which this type of performance is built might actually be speaking to us about how

theatre was being used to actualize and at the same time engage with the practice of privatisation and outsourcing, which have become the hallmark of global commodity capitalism in late twentieth-century to early twenty-first. (p. 137)

The final chapter, 'Still Living', examines the relationship between performance and photography. For Schneider, 'performance poses problems when thinking about photography. And photography poses problems to performance'. (142) She argues that reading or debating the difference between photography and performance in terms of "lack and loss or dead or live" actually misses the point of both photography's theatricality (liveness). The latter is demonstrated by the possibility photography offers for a deferred 'temporal liveness' on the one hand and performance's ability to contain and encapsulate stillness and its record on the other. Schneider, citing LePecki's thesis on liveness, argues that photography and performance 'rather than being wholly distinct... participate in the ambivalent gesture of the time-lag' (p. 143) Further, that:

The delegation of live performance as vanishing in time and photography as capturing time has contributed to our inability to read the two media as intimately related, even co-constituted, in the gesture of the still.

(p. 148)

In this book, therefore, Schneider has certainly 'troubled' the prevailing idea of performance as loss or disappearance by claiming that, perhaps it is through its ability to enable the placement of one time into the frame of another time, its ability to enable the past to return, albeit momentarily, that performance makes it possible for the present to enter into conversation with the past, thus ensuring the past remains, does not disappear, and is not forgotten as Chuck Woodhead and the Civil War reenactors hope. However, Schneider could have done so without subjecting the reader to long tracks of a tedious and unnecessary obfuscating style of prose, which occasionally got in the way of such an interesting subject matter.