



## Postmodern Culture

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### Additional Information

## Carla Harryman's Non/Representation and the Ethics of Dispersive Performance

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary poet's theater audiences might best be characterized by community rupture: each member experiences an individual identification in the collective space of the theater. This essay takes a closer look at this audience formation through the work of Carla Harryman, a poet-playwright associated with the San Francisco branch of what has become known as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing. Harryman's 2008 work *Mirror Play* weaves together poetic experimentalism with references to the U.S.'s role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the Gulf War, and to the 1968 campy intergalactic anti-war movie *Barbarella*. She employs poet's theater conceptually as a means of rethinking our engagement with political narratives. The result is an interpretive "community" marked, paradoxically, by discontinuity and dispersion. Portraying an America defined not by physical borders but by complex military, economic, cultural, and political relationships, Harryman's work plays through the ways in which these relationships are constructed and maintained. What emerges is not an interpretive free-for-all but rather an embodiment of the ethical dilemma in the postmodern era--the contradiction, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham puts it, between "How ought one to live?" and "What ought I to do?", between generalizable norms and individual acts in actual (and unique) situations.

I live in a fabrication near something I have never said before.

--Carla Harryman, "Property"

In "The Ear of the Poet in the Mouth of the Performer," an essay-play that works through the politics of poetry-performance in the post-9/11 U.S., Carla Harryman recalls a performance in which she participated in the early 1990s: the wearing of a pin designed by artist Daniel Davidson that bore the deceptively simple message "Iraqi." Responses to Harryman's wearing the pin oscillated between "largely friendly looks and pleasantly unanticipated conversations from mostly Arab immigrant and Arab American shopkeepers of various religions and nationalities," and the confusion of "literal minded American types" who took the pin as a confession, as a "coming-out as Iraqi." As a performance, wearing the pin was not simply a personal expression of solidarity; it was also a demonstration of the ways in which meaning can mutate in different contexts and for different audience members. Significantly, the power of the performance came just as often in the moments of confusion and misrecognition it created: while the Arabs and Arab-Americans in Harryman's account may have gotten it "right," the more "literal minded" observers too found ways of identifying with the performance, though not perhaps in expected or intended ways. Harryman recalls, for example, that one woman took the pin as "an invitation to exchange confidences, hers being that she had an excess of facial hair and that she was terrified that her husband would find out about it." While the woman was mistaken in her assumption, the identification makes some sense to Harryman, who points out that in this interpretation both women "had something to hide until this private moment of mutual outing, even if I hadn't been deliberately hiding something like she had" ("The Ear"). Although the woman was interpellated by the performance, the performer was not in control of that interpellation.

As wearer of the pin, Harryman felt a political responsibility to the responses it provoked. The purpose of the performance, she explains, was:

to diffuse the theater of war and to dramatize the real life conflations that lead to the targeting of Iraqi subjects as enemies. As a performer of the pin, one becomes responsible in a local context to major world events. The performer citizen engages in a dialogic meditation that exceeds the limits of conventional narrative and argumentation as she becomes aware of her personhood stripped of reductive theatrics and narratives of identity. As with much performance art of the 70's, Davidson's work is partly about the performer's experience itself; and like the performance values of the modernist avant-garde, it assertively provokes a response to emerging states of affairs.

("The Ear")

The performer of the pin circulates, but is not in control of, the meanings of language already embedded in social and political narratives. In this sense, I would argue not that the performer's "personhood [is] stripped of . . . narratives of identity," as Harryman puts it, but rather that the pin clasps the performer to already-circulating narratives, which may then be embraced or rejected, identified or disidentified with. Harryman is wearing not a pin that states "I claim solidarity with Iraqi victims of war," which would be a speech-like assertion of her political beliefs and identity--a self-narration--but rather a pin that appears to declare an identity that is not self-evident. In order to make sense of the pin, observers must interpret it within the range of their own experiences and understandings. And in subsequently interacting with the performer, they project those identifications onto her body in social exchange, thereby enacting new narratives. The performance event therefore takes place in the interaction between the performer and the audience, or,

perhaps more accurately, in what the audience does with the performance. The wearing of the Iraqi pin is a speech act with unpredictable effects, and in this sense, both Harryman and her observers become performers of its meaning. Harryman's role in the performance is one of responsibility to her interlocutors, but it is, in some respects, a non-normative responsibility carried out as listening generously to and considering a range of possible identifications. While she mobilizes the structures, Harryman does not lead the interpretations. And although she hints that the Arab and Arab-American observers got it right, she does not accuse others of getting it "wrong," but rather of getting it different. In wearing the pin, the performer becomes responsible to this difference.

Significantly, the performance must remain peripatetic in order to succeed, since success relies on individual responses not subject to the social pressure of the collective space of the theater. One of the ways Harryman tries to retain this peripatetic quality in the space of the theater is to construct a dispersive theater in which meaning is allowed to oscillate rather than being tied to a single correct interpretation. The oscillation of meaning, Una Chaudhuri reminds us, is "an open space or aporia in the political 'known'"--the space of revolution (163). Harryman suggests that the ear of the poet is tuned to the oscillation, and in her poet's theater, it is the job of the performer to keep this oscillation alive. In "The Ear of the Poet," for example, Harryman juxtaposes the discussion of the Iraqi pin performance with an excerpt from a Gertrude Stein play, leaving the audience to interpret for themselves the relationship between the pieces. While Harryman acknowledges that "the discussion [of the Iraqi pin performance] preceding the extract from [Stein's] play would infect the semantic meaning of [Stein's] work--an inference would be brought forth that at this present moment a poet behind a locked door, a no longer living poet, Iraqi, and people are connected and that there is a simultaneity made between the word 'Iraqi' in my exposition and the word 'people' in Stein's play"; this is not the "right" or even intended interpretation but rather the result of habituated interpretive practices themselves. Dispersive theater places under scrutiny both the structure of interpretive practices and the very impulse to interpret. The space of dispersive theater is therefore an ethical space; it is a space "where thought itself experiences an obligation to form a relation with its other--not only other thoughts but other-*than*-thought" (**Harpham 37**).

I discuss this example here at length because it offers a relatively self-contained way into thinking about some of the strategies and preoccupations of Harryman's poet's theater, which is both like and unlike Davidson's performance art piece. Harryman's use of Davidson as an element in her own essay-play demonstrates her ongoing engagement with intertextuality, hybrid genre, and art as/and analytic discourse, but she also uses Davidson to think through her own artistic practice. Davidson represents the use of performance not merely as a provisional testing ground in moments of impasse,<sup>1</sup> but as a permanently provisional space, "one that in part fulfills an open-ended, non-objective mobile role that is exploratory, improvisatory, and that takes language as a medium as seriously as it does the other mediums of innovative theater that have superseded language" ("The Ear"). Like Davidson, Harryman is interested both in the relationship of narrative to non-narrative and in the way this relationship figures and is figured by physical bodies. Also like Davidson, much of Harryman's performance is conceptual, though it is usually written as scripted dramatic theater. Moreover, as Harryman's own commentary above makes clear, in recent years, she too has become interested in the social and political consequences of her artistic experiments. For Harryman, this shift in interest from her own "art activity and its genre excesses" to something else not clearly identified

but characterized by "a loss of a sense of form-desire" is precipitated by U.S. militarization against Iraq as a response to 9/11. Viewed through this prism of art-activism, Harryman's poet's theater becomes, like the wearing of the Iraqi pin, "a kind of homework assignment" that allows both artist and audience to think through their relationships to form, media, discourse, embodiment, and identity ("The Ear"). Harryman's discussion of the Iraqi pin project reveals the ways in which discursive conventions and performing subjects sometimes collide and sometimes collaborate. What Harryman demonstrates is that the real and the symbolic are not locked in a unidirectional relationship of mediation, but rather that they influence each other and this influence is site-specific. The Iraqi pin performance, Harryman's plays, and indeed poet's theater in general investigates the uses to which meanings are put. While such an investigation recognizes that language is neither stable nor univocal, this recognition is not its conclusion but rather its jumping-off point. Poet's theater is not therefore deconstructive, as much as it relies on a deconstructive understanding of language.

Asking what comes first, the poetry or the theater, narrative or non-narrative, subject or object, muscle or skeleton, Harryman muses, "I would prefer to emphasize the skeleton. I would prefer the movement to be the movement of the muscles lifted by the skeleton. When the muscles are not lifted by the skeleton they become athletic. One becomes aggressive and competitive. The theater becomes a theater of conflict. And somebody has to win" ("The Ear"). While I want to be careful not to tie Harryman's ideas down to a simple metaphor, part of what she is suggesting here is that bodies are inseparable from the social forces that animate them. While both muscles and skeleton are components of bodies, they serve distinct but overlapping purposes: one mainly structure, the other mainly force. An illustration accompanying the essay depicts a knife held between teeth and lips, a cooperation of skeleton and muscle that can be read, simultaneously, as both defensive and aggressive. This is a depiction not of an oral weapon but of an aural weapon, both spoken and heard, suggested by the ear-in-the-mouth of the work's title. In the historical moment of the post-9/11 U.S. "War on Terror," Harryman implies, muscle-force has been recruited into insidious service, sculpting language and narrative into weapons of social conflict. Yet just as both muscles and skeleton are necessary to movement, so narrative is necessary to communication. The solution, Harryman writes in "Toy Boats," is "to distribute narrative rather than deny it" (107).

## Language Poetry, Poet's Theater, and the Body

Harryman's theater practice grows in part out of her participation in the Bay Area poetry community commonly known as "Language" writers, many of whom rework narrative as a political principle. One of the tactics of Language writing is to foreground the conventionalized function of the "I" and of other narrative tools. Such tools mark relationships of location, antagonism, causality, intention, and emphasis and "provide the illusion of movement, direction and location for the reader," Michael Davidson points out, "but when they lose their indexical function, they point at the conventionalized nature of writing itself" (79). When "I" tell a story from memory, who is the "I" that speaks, and who is the "I" that is spoken of? What is the overlap

between the two and in what way does each help to constitute the other? Bringing these questions into the space of embodied performance, Harryman puts further pressure on the conventionalized function of linguistic markers as indicators of identity presumed to be natural.

Harryman's *Memory Play* (1994) explores the narrative and performative construction of the "I" via memory, played out differently by the play's three main characters, Pelican, Fish, and Reptile:

REPTILE:

If I tell you one thing that I remember, you will think I'm an idiot for remembering only one thing. This is one thing that makes theater different from real conversation. If I provide you with several of my most esteemed memories, you will probably believe there are more where those came from, and I will have earned your respect. This will make theater a little more like real conversation.

PELICAN:

I have a job and it is virtually all I can think about; however, I think this: memory is nothing but words stored up in an inefficient computer. What you will remember of this conversation will be nothing like what went into its construction. Such understanding promotes success in business.

.....

FISH:

I had suffered for a long time from the illusion that remembering inhibited one's experience. Now the illusion is almost my only memory. . . . [Later,] I will remember something else and not this. I will have forgotten the story to which I currently refer. Each person has his or her own theater. I propose this as an exhibit or a symptom of my personal stage.

(7-8)

Reptile is a chameleon, disguising himself in the camouflage of social discourse. And yet his disguise is not aimed at deception. Although Reptile suggests that whether or not we are respected or maligned depends on the strength of our (storytelling/conversational) performance, he seems to move beyond Erving Goffman's notion of impression management to suggest that social discourse is all the truth there is.<sup>2</sup> Pelican, on the other hand, focuses on the misinformation that occurs between what one says and what another hears, and promotes a notion of performance as information processing, mechanical and morally indifferent. Meanwhile, Fish appears to recognize the necessary relationship between discourse (remembering) and experience while at the same time acknowledging that the back story of identity is often forgotten, that identity is assumed without realizing what that identity is built upon. Fish might be taken as an example of contemporary performance studies' notions of identity and performance: while we may understand that identity is performative, we experience it as natural. Despite their differences, what Reptile, Pelican, and Fish share is a notion of memory as performative, produced by and in narrative.

Memory relies, then, on the doubling of creative narrative and social discourse, a doppelgänger which first appears in the stage directions with which the prologue opens: "A bedtime story/conversation in a little tent town out in the salt flats" (7). What one first notices about this direction is its generic ambivalence. While

there would be little difficulty producing the visual elements of such a scenic design in performance (a small tent town, salt flats, bedtime), how would the difference-and-sameness indicated by the phrase "story/conversation" be performed? The slash is itself a radically textual performance that suggests the imbrication of social discourse with storytelling, with narrative, and indeed this relationship is the play's central investigation. W. B. Worthen has argued that "modern drama in print typically frames a dialectical tension between the proprieties of the page and the identities of drama" (62). Harryman's slash turns this page-stage tension outward, toward social life. Art (story) is different from, but inextricably bound to, social discourse (conversation). Storytelling is both oral and literary art. Harryman's printed play alludes to the chiasmus of literary textuality and social discourse by putting the play's status--as literary artifact, as embodied performance--into question. While Harryman makes use of what Worthen has called the "accessories" of modernist dramatic publication--"page design, typography, act and scene numbering, speech prefixes, and stage directions" (13)--she does not do so in order to control the stage performance from the page. Despite Chris Stroffolino's assertion that *Memory Play* "works at least as well as a closet drama as it does in theater performance," the page and stage versions of the play are not correspondent but collaborative, together investigating the performativity of memory (177). While each version can of course stand on its own, the play's textual-theatrical ambivalence proliferates its identity across genres and across forms of reproduction, undermining the final authority of any single version.

In bringing the language of the text out into the space of performance--performing "as language event the fluidity between public and psychological spaces," as Harryman puts it ("Site" 158)--her plays investigate the social activities of language within a context of actual human relations, of the audience members and performers within a specific social space (that of the performance at a particular moment in time) and in relation to specific objects. Language writing on the page explores language in individual interaction with readers, while the performance of Language writing in poetry readings is bounded by the conventions of a touring authorial performance that rhetorically position the event (albeit falsely) as site- and audience-nonspecific, if not actually transcendent. In contrast to this, Harryman's poet's theater emphasizes embodied identities at the same time it deconstructs them. These identities are not incidental, and they are not nonspecific; rather, they are fluid. The character list of Harryman's play *Performing Objects Stationed in The Sub World*, for example, specifies a "White woman," "Child," and "Black man," but the author's notes for performance explain that "[t]he categories of gender and ethnicity are mutable in this play, based on whatever circumstance of the performance" (qtd in "Site" 158). This is accomplished in part by having multiple actors play each character but also by leaving the gap between character and actor visible: "For instance C3, the Black Man, reads the newspaper but that doesn't mean that C3 becomes a Black Man who reads the newspaper, but rather C3 performs a reading of the newspaper: his identity or identities such that it is or they are, migrates through activities" ("Site" 162). In this way, the objects with which the actors interact "do not serve as extensions or illustrations of subjectivity nor do they appear with autonomous luminosity"; instead, they are "constitutive of an instability of social encounters and uncertain boundaries between interior fantasy and exterior fact, whether they are sentient or inert" (162). This does not, however, preclude psychological depth. Rather, characters are defined not by the moral challenges they face but rather by the communication they perform and are performed by.

In *Memory Play*, the playing through of multiple discursive and gestural registers in the formation of identity drives the action. As bodies and spoken language self-consciously jostle one another in performance, the relationship between discourse, identity, and embodiment takes center stage. Reptile's lines quoted above appear to interpellate audience members into a self-conscious suspension of disbelief: he explicitly acknowledges our tacit agreement to let one memory in "art" stand in for the multiple memories of "real" conversation.<sup>3</sup> In art, he suggests, a single story or image (memory) can take on a variety of symbolisms and resonances; in conversation, however, we may question such overdetermination of a single moment in one's life. But the "I" who speaks this line is shifty, posing as a social interlocutor and literary-dramatic character simultaneously. On the page, Reptile's "I" seems to remain consistent, a distant observer of the relationship between theater and conversation. Spoken by an actor onstage, however, the "I" oscillates between actor and dramatic character. Is this line a rehearsed but direct address to the audience by an actor who will soon become a character in the play, or is the actor already in character? And how does this ambiguity position audience members in relation to the play?

This last question raises the issue of what poet Joan Retallack has called "reciprocal alterity," which she conceptualizes as an equilibrium between, on the one hand, the "ethical and epistemological destabilizing principle" that we are never fully knowable to one another or to ourselves and, on the other, community, receptivity, and intention (5). Is the "I," who--according to Reptile--can earn "your" respect, a "fictional" character or a "real" actor? Either way, of course, the "I" is a construction based in part on the speaker's performance and in part on the audience's conclusions in relation to that performance--making both intention and reception important matters to consider. The construction is simultaneously grammatical and epistemological, since pronouns are a necessary part of communication despite their radical insufficiency and contingency. Pronouns suggest independent subjectivity, and in doing so contribute to a model of individualism. In order to "move away from models of cultural and political agency lodged in isolated heroic acts and simplistic notions of cause and effect," as Retallack urges, we must therefore think through our tools of communication at their most basic level (3). Both Retallack and Harryman propose "a fine new kind of realism," to quote William James's remark in a letter to Gertrude Stein about her writing (qtd. **Mellow 147**). Retallack approaches this version of realism by appealing to the essay form, because, she argues, the essay writes from the position of an "I" understood as selfsame, whereas the lyric "I" of poetry is already understood to be a persona. The theater, however, presents an unusually apt arena for an investigation of representation, for the presence of bodies on stage always simultaneously evokes both the characters being portrayed and the actors "themselves."

If the Humanities have emerged from the "turn to language" only to enter the "turn to the visual,"<sup>4</sup> then Harryman's work provides an apt vehicle for exploring our negotiations of these turns. Language writing arose simultaneously with the rise of linguistic theory in the 1970s, and the relationship between the two has always been seen as collaborative--Language writing *as* theory. Some saw Language writing as the perfect object of the new theory and saw developments in theory as supporting the sense that Language writing had a cognitive and social use. But not everyone agreed on the role of theory in Language writing.<sup>5</sup> In *There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory* (given its first full performance in 1989), Harryman satirizes what she sees as a

tendency toward theory fetishism. In *Memory Play* she similarly pokes fun at theory's drive to dominate, this time in the figure of a child's toy, humorously named the Miltonic Humiliator. Meanwhile, recent productions of *Mirror Play* seem to indict theory as the production of knowledge removed from lived experience; in debates about representation and gender, the body becomes the vanishing point of theory.

Although San Francisco poet's theater emerged along with what has become known as "Language" writing, it has not figured into those historical accounts until recently.<sup>6</sup> Nick Robinson and Eileen Corder founded the San Francisco Poets Theater (SFPT) in 1979, and by the time the final SFPT play was produced in 1984, nearly a dozen plays had been produced, involving a wide range of "Language" and associated poets in a variety of roles (from playwright, actor, set designer, and director to publicist and poster/program designer), including Harryman, Corder, Nick Robinson, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Alan Bernheimer, Johanna Drucker, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, and Bob Perelman, among others.<sup>7</sup> While some of these play texts have been published (almost exclusively in small journals), there are virtually no sustained examinations, let alone theorizations, of this performance work.<sup>8</sup>

One of the reasons for this neglect has to do with Language writing's almost exclusive focus, in the 1970s and 80s, on material textuality. In a 1986 review of Harryman's *Percentage* and *Property*, for example, Jean Day explains the dramatic form of these hybrid works metaphorically, as a *theatrum mundi* in which "'We' are acting out aspects of a common drama through language, not just in the sense that we're using the same tools, but in the sense that it is language which makes the private public, makes the passion of the revolutionary *charge*" (120-121, emphasis in original). Steve Benson--Harryman's close friend, fellow performer, and frequent theater collaborator--refers to the published text of Harryman's play *La Quotidienne* as "the play itself," folding the entire work under an umbrella of textual interpretation when he argues that "[t]he lack of any stable context or prescribed behavior indicates no means or property other than discourse by which the figures can gain leverage in the struggles for authority and autonomy" (24, 23). Focusing exclusively on discourse, such an interpretation ignores the ways in which the actor-characters give the play's figures an authority and autonomy outside of discourse, in the presence of live bodies on stage.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in an essay published in *Poetics Journal*, Alan Bernheimer suggests that poet's theater consists of works "written towards production . . . work[s] with then two lives to lead, one self-evident and the other potential" (70). But what is "self-evident" about a poet's theater text like *Memory Play*? Bernheimer sees words as agents, which "[l]eft to their own devices . . . tell stories by themselves, resolute (resonant in the evolving history of their use)" (70), but of course it is this latter assertion--that words are "resonant in the evolving history of their use"--that points out the falsehood of the former suggestion that words have their own agency, for the "stories" of words are constituted in their social use. Certainly, unintended meanings and histories can (and often do) arise when we use language, but to characterize this as an act of words "by themselves" obscures the ways in which meaning both constitutes and is constituted by bodies and embodied identities both on the stage and in social exchange.

Acknowledging the work of Language poets such as Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, and Charles Bernstein, who engage the performativity of material language, Worthen too considers this work as a textual phenomenon, interesting for its similarities to printed drama (which the title of his last chapter suggests is

"something like poetry") but not engaged *as* drama or theater. But Worthen's discussion of anti-theatricality in both poetry and theater is an important step in opening the relationship between two fields normally considered to have very little overlap. Most significantly for my purposes here, Worthen observes that

the materiality of the mise-en-page, the precise construction of printed words in space, does not operate as a kind of stage direction, an authorized and authoritarian effort to govern subsequent performance (though some authors may intend it that way), nor is it complete in itself, a container or "can" of perfected meanings waiting to be emptied by performance. Instead, Language poetics implies the incommensurability of these two modes of writing's "thickness." The poem's physical design on the page, and its physicalized performance cannot be collapsed into one another so that the script grounds the performance or the performance realizes the script. . . . Language poetics reframes the page as a distinctive field of play, insisting that words can and must be joined in ways beyond the habits of conventional speech.

(138)

Indeed, in "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," a collaborative essay on the political and aesthetic practices of Language writing, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten critique the expressivist lyric, institutionalized in literary and creative writing programs in the U.S., as responsible for "the scenario of disinterested critical evaluation reinforcing the alleged moral autonomy of the poem" (269).<sup>10</sup>

In the last few years, however, the infiltration of performance studies into literature departments has sparked a more performance-oriented interest in hybrid works such as Harryman's. In the first five months of 2008, Harryman's play *Third Man* was staged in San Francisco as part of a SFPT retrospective,<sup>11</sup> *Memory Play* was produced in Chicago with the support of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and a weekend of poet's theater plays directed by Harryman, including her own *Mirror Play*, Frank O'Hara's *Try! Try!* and an adaptation from Barrett Watten's *Bad History*, was presented in Chicago as part of a festival of poet's theater.<sup>12</sup> During this same period, *The Grand Piano* series--subtitled an "experiment in collective autobiography" and documenting the rise of Language writing in San Francisco--has begun to present Harryman's work in particular and poet's theater in general as a fundamental part of the history of Language writing.<sup>13</sup>

Harryman's theater adds to Language writing a consideration of how the presence of bodies affects our understanding of language politics, particularly in the different ways language and bodies mark a threshold in interrelated processes of speaking, enacting, and knowing. It may be helpful here to recall Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of the body as a kind of "living memory pad" onto and via which not only behaviors but also beliefs and values are inscribed; childhood learning leads to a kind of automatically enacted belief that is not a state of mind but rather "a state of the body" (68). As practical sense becomes naturalized, the source of the practices becomes obscured; "It is because agents never know completely what they are doing," Bourdieu argues, "that what they do has more sense than they know" (69). But whereas for Bourdieu acting and theater become ways of recalling these automated, naturalized thoughts and feelings,<sup>14</sup>

Harryman sees theater as a means of defamiliarizing the social ideologies inscribed onto bodies--ideologies that, for Bourdieu, are obscured by time and naturalization and that, for Judith Butler, must frequently be denied in the necessary construction of subjective autonomy (26).

Poet's theater is a collaborative performance between generative language and physical gesturality that can help us understand the complex linguistic and embodied performativities that constitute and materialize identity. Gesture is a bodily act that, in the realm of the social, becomes a sign of communication. Martin Puchner, who has written thoughtfully on arrested movement in modernist drama, describes gesture as "the praxis and labor that go into the production of language and linguistic communication, the labor that is more or less erased in the finished, linguistic product" (28). Isolated and disjointed, individual gestures can only be amassed into an aggregate rather than organically connected into a whole.<sup>15</sup> Puchner notes that both Nietzsche and Adorno maligned gesturality as that which prevents actors on stage from presenting organic wholes.<sup>16</sup> Postmodernism's valorization of the aggregate, however, offers a new kind of pro-theatricalism that celebrates precisely the gesturality disavowed by these theorists of modernism. Harryman's theater embraces the aggregative quality of gesture by using denaturalized acting to create paratactic (rather than syntactic or hypotactic) structures. In rehearsal for a 2008 production of *Memory Play*,<sup>17</sup> for example, the actor playing Fish needed help slowing down her speech, so she was given an activity to perform: writing a note on a piece of paper. This practical solution to an acting problem soon became an interpretive issue, however. What should the actors then *do* with the note? Director Catharine Sullivan wanted Fish to hand the note to Child, but Harryman (who was present at rehearsals) was adamant that this was not possible, presumably because it transformed the activity of note-writing into the narrative gesture of passing on instructions. In the end, it was agreed that Pelican would intercept the note without (oral or gestural) comment. In preventing the note-writing gesture from cohering into narrative meaning, Harryman and Sullivan created a paratactic structure--one gesture and another gesture and another gesture that do not bear any clear narrative relationship to one another. At the same time, Sullivan and Harryman's disagreement over what to do next demonstrates the tendency of aggregating gestures to cohere into character identity and narrative meaning.

As an embodied act with the potential for social meaning, gesture both is and isn't language.<sup>18</sup> Gesture reaches simultaneously inward toward the construction of subjectivity and outward toward the construction of social identity, but it also relies on bodily impulse, understood within a system of discourse but not reducible to it. As both being and representation, gesture reveals what Peggy Phelan has called the body's metonymic relationship to the subject. While the real exceeds representation, representation also exceeds the real. The identity produced in and through this reciprocal excess is not only a marker, Phelan argues, but an ethics:

Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to another--which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being.

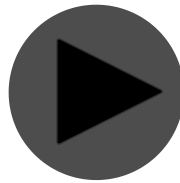
(13)

In denying narrative coherence to Fish's note-writing gesture, the production of *Memory Play* discussed above places the burden of meaning on audience members themselves. What the body does and what it means do not perfectly correspond. Making meaning out of a gesture necessarily involves a merging of interpreter and interpreted, of self and other. Harryman, like Phelan, is interested in the relationship of representation to being, a relationship she investigates via a strategy she characterizes as "non/narrative" when performed in prose, and which we might modify as "non/representation" in theater. As in *Memory Play's* play of "story/conversation," the slash here indicates not an opposition but an imbrication of two modes.

## Mimesis and Misrecognition in *Mirror Play*

Harryman's latest performance work, *Mirror Play*, revolves around violence perpetrated by nations against other nations or against (its own or other) individuals. Divided into four acts, a prologue, and an epilogue (all appearing in reverse order) but without stage directions or speech prefixes, the stage performance differs widely from production to production. What remains consistent, however, is a web of political and social references--for example, media portrayals of Rachel Corrie, the American peace activist killed defending a Palestinian house against U.S.-built bulldozers operated by the Israeli Defense Forces; images from the second Gulf War of U.S. soldiers raiding Iraqi tombs and Iraqis' own destruction of Iraqi cultural artifacts; and the 1968 campy intergalactic anti-war movie *Barbarella*, whose star Jane Fonda was transformed in the 1970s from GI pinup girl to despised anti-war activist and then again in the 1980s to aerobic video icon. *Mirror Play* portrays an America defined not by physical borders but by complex military, economic, cultural, and political relationships, playing through the ways in which these relationships are constructed and maintained. The play is both radically textual and radically gestural, using paratactic gesture and language as well as architectural space not to reflect the interiority of the subject but rather to help constitute and figure it. In this sense, *Mirror Play* represents a broad shift in thinking from the concept of an individual subject, seen as a self-sufficient and independent whole, to the concept of the social subject, in which the social (exterior) is a necessary and mutable circumstance of subject constitution (interior). Throughout the play, "wholes"--words, characters, clothes, rooms--are revealed as mere resting points in the ongoing process of meaning-making. What is simultaneously difficult and hopeful about this piece is that it dares to imagine a politics (or ethics) for those who are produced in and by narrative. *Mirror Play* does not simply reveal or reflect this condition of narrativity; it tries to think a way that we might be active within this condition rather than merely subject to it.

The play opens, in one version (see Fig. 1 below),<sup>19</sup> with a simple image of homey domesticity--clothes hanging on a line, blowing in the wind--portrayed entirely in language: "Flying. Clothes flying. Sleeves wrapping / around clouds, cinching them in, dragging / them" (178).<sup>20</sup>



**Video 1.**

Scene from *Mirror Play* by Carla Harryman, with Jon Raskin, John Olson, Roham Shaikhani, Elana Elyce, Abbas Bazzi, Mary Byrnes, and Wolanda Lewis. Directed by Jim Cave and performed at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale, Michigan, August 14, 2005. Filmed by Asa Watten. Used by permission.

The empty clothes are both human products and human forms, registering simultaneously the presence and absence of human beings themselves. As the sleeves first "wrap" around clouds, then "cinch," and finally "drag" them, the clothes imply a kind of "domestic" violence, most clearly perhaps a reference to the Clothesline Project, which protests against, and memorializes the victims of a private kind of "domestic" violence against women. But it is also perhaps a reference to that which inspired the Clothesline Project: the AIDS Quilt, originally created to memorialize the victims of AIDS and to protest against their neglect by American society and history. As theater and performance critic Elinor Fuchs has pointed out, participant-created AIDS quilts, in their jumbling of Jews, Catholics, Muslims, and New Age Buddhists with sequins, flags, prayers, a measuring spoon, and much more, perform a postmodern breakdown of master narratives--in direct contrast to the hero memorials of "modern imperial politics" (195-196).<sup>21</sup> Significantly, in the Detroit production directed by Jim Cave,<sup>22</sup> no flying shirts are visually present on stage (see Fig. 1 above); rather, they're represented as artifacts of language, drawing attention to the ways in which narrative has been inscribed on bodies even to the point of replacing them altogether (as one speaker says in *Mirror Play*, "Images are crowding. Crowding us out" [207]). If the shirts had been physically represented or staged they

might simply have performed an iconic function, but because they are described in language--a reference to a reference--the very textuality of the representation creates not a destruction of visual representation but a recognition of the very condition of representation.

Despite the lack of narrative through-line, the play achieves continuity both by taking as its central focus the investigation of the conditions of representation and by returning again and again to key words and images. Cycling back to the image of clothing after several pages, for example, the text meditates on the perspective created by choosing some descriptors over others:

...This scheme

Imagines clothing in terms of whole or complete entities: a shirt, a hat, a shoe, etc. So there is still much that it cannot describe. For instance, in the great outdoors, the clothes rot and decompose. Birds pull at their threads. The threads mingle with other things. The thread is no longer a discrete thing but part of a unit for which there is no name until the nest is complete. Then the unit is a nest. I wear a sleeve on my heart. Note this also. And other harmless events.  
(note)  
(note)

*echo makes a note (192)*

To imagine clothing as a finished object--rather than as a composite of that which went into its making or as decomposed parts to be used in the making of other objects--is, the text asserts, a "scheme" rather than an inevitability. If the object that is no-longer-a-shirt-and-not-yet-a-nest has no name, it becomes subjugated, merely a stage in the creation of an "actual" object and meaningless except in relation to the end product (recalling Puchner's definition of gesture above).

From this cluster of images and lines, organized thematically around the impact of language use on conceptual thinking (which is hardly "harmless"), the text suddenly shifts paratactically to a reordered cliché--"I wear a sleeve on my heart"--with no apparent relation to the previous lines. One way a reader might approach this shift is simply to give in to the experience of abrupt change, with no attempt to impose meaning. Habituated reading practices are more likely, however, to coerce a meaningful connection. Is this sentence perhaps another example of language that privileges object over process? What is the relationship of the "I" to the objects (clothing, nest) that came before? And what do we make of the shift in tone from material objects such as shirts, hats, threads, and nests, to symbolic objects, such as a heart and, now, sleeve (which can be worn on a heart only metaphorically)? A nest made out of threads is a home (a physical place) and home is where the heart is (a symbolic place). Emotional vulnerability (wearing one's heart on one's

sleeve) is replaced with emotional self-preservation (wearing a sleeve on one's heart). What was formerly outside (clothing) moves inward (to "I"). Here the text mimes its meaning through the generation of interpretive possibilities: any single understanding represents a "scheme," useful perhaps but certainly not inevitable.

But the text quoted above also moves beyond semantic frontiers toward the semiotic border between language and music inhabited by the word "note." This single word suggests simultaneously a musical sound, different speech modes (command--"note this"--or description), and textual objects (a hierarchical category designator [i.e., footnote] or a casual piece of writing). The use of parentheses on the page--an instantiation which cannot be precisely performed on stage--is a textual convention indicating that the word "note" might be read as a placeholder (as in "I intend to insert a note here") or as a stage direction (as in "Play a musical note here"). In either case, the note functions as an (explanatory or musical) "echo." The play's textual performance on the page, then, is not identical with its performance on stage. The relationship of the text to stage is neither directive nor documentary, neither script nor recording. Reading the text and attending the performance produce experientially distinct plays that nevertheless constitute linked "work" exploring the relationship of textual language to embodied performance. The semantic overdetermination of "note" in the text, for example, is linked but not identical to the overdetermination of the voice, as speech and as instrument, in performance: Both the Detroit and San Francisco productions featured a jaw harp, which produces sound uncannily in between language and music.<sup>23</sup> Working with sound and music at the limits of language, these performances in part explored the ways in which sounds morph into and out of meaning.

What is at stake here is an awareness of the multiple processes by which we make experience meaningful. When a speaker asserts at the beginning of Harryman's play that "the composition of the sky is a matter of knowledge" (178), for example, she suggests both that the sky's physical make-up (one sense of "composition") can be scientifically known, but also that this knowledge is itself a matter of narrative construction (a second sense of "composition"). The goal is not to question the makeup of the sky, but rather to suggest that what is known must also take into account *how* it is known. A few lines later the play suggests that "addicts" to knowledge "suffer atmosphere," a line which is vocally elongated in performance--"atmosphhhere"--to suggest both the vaporous air that surrounds a planet and, simultaneously, a fear of the *atmos*, or vaporosity, perhaps the vaporosity or lack of solidity of knowledge itself. Here, vocalized performance vaporizes our certainty about the meaning of the line, and in doing so, it both mimes and produces its meaning. *Mirror Play* employs not a poetics of memory as witness but rather a poetics of memory as performative, as *productive* of the relationships it purports to describe and attend, a strategy that echoes Elin Diamond's notion of mimesis as the *production* of truth through a manipulation of the mirroring process.

In the psychological space of *Mirror Play*'s collectivity, all aspects of discourse are both positive and negative. The play alludes to the imbricated discourses of health, war, beauty, and pornography, for example, in its repeated references to Barbarella, the title role from the soft-porn sci-fi film that made the actress Jane Fonda famous. In the film, Barbarella is a representative of the Federation of Earth who is sent on a peace-

seeking mission to rid the world of a weapon that could mean the end of humanity. Making love not war across the galaxy, Barbarella made Fonda a favorite pinup among GIs. *Mirror Play's* reference to "fa(r)ce and pornography" (198) certainly alludes to *Barbarella*, but it might just as aptly describe Fonda's 1980s reincarnation as the aerobic ideal of her wildly popular workout video series. Dressed in form-hugging fitness fashion, Fonda bent over and spread her legs in a model of arrested movement. But in the period between *Barbarella* and the height of her workout popularity, Fonda also became an anti-war activist, speaking out against the Vietnam War starting in 1970. Though she remained a sexual icon, Fonda's perceived betrayal of American troops transformed her into a target of overt, if symbolic, sexual violence.<sup>24</sup> "At places where soldiers or former soldiers congregate," Rick Perlstein reports, "there'll be stickers of her likeness on the urinals; one is an invitation to symbolic rape: Fonda in her 1980s 'work-out' costume, her legs splayed, pudenda at the bulls-eye. Every night at lights-out midshipmen at the US Naval Academy cry out 'Goodnight, bitch!' in her honour" (3).

Disturbing as this report is, the discourse behind the violence is what interests me here. Ironically, this "symbolic rape" is in part encouraged by the false mirror--the farce/face--of aerobicism misrecognized as athleticism. Johannes Birringer has argued that the image of the aerobic body is structured around a:

scene of instruction/mimicry that promotes an exercise of subjective and corporeal self-transformation while masking the ritualized submission of the body to serial, monotonous, and stationary motion. In her willful self-production of an actively new feminine body, the woman participant misrecognizes the mirror structure in this performative exchange, aligned as it is around persistent cultural/hierarchical oppositions between mobility/immobility, seeing/being seen, and so forth. She is drawn into a phantom interaction with the two-dimensional, depthless and absent body of the video image that simulates an actual relation between body model and "real" performance in "real" time.

(215)

The aerobic body, always a feminized body, is immobilized and put on display. In contrast, the military body might be thought of as an athleticized body, masculinized, mobile, and--recalling Harryman's discussion of the athleticism of muscles acting without the assistance of the skeleton--competitive and aggressive. The discursive oppositions promulgated by the aerobic-athletic dichotomy contribute to, among other things, both kinds of "domestic" violence suggested in the play's opening verbal image of flying clothes (violence against women and against discursively feminized homosexual men). Although *Mirror Play* alludes to physical acts of violence (as in one production at the Hilberry Gallery in suburban Detroit when a hooded male figure claiming "Nobody wanted war" conjured, at least for me, images of torture associated both with American Vietnam POWs and with Iraqi prisoners at the American military prison Abu Ghraib), these are not the focus of *Mirror Play*. Rather, as I have done in this example of the soldiers' violence against Fonda, Harryman attends to the discourses that both materialize the body and enable violence--discourses that rely on a range of mis/recognitions. Employing not a poetics of memory as witness but a poetics of memory as performative, as productive of the relationships it purports to describe and attend, *Mirror Play* plays through and with the notion of national(ist) memory.

Exploring the psychological space of collectivity, *Mirror Play* offers a counter to mass culture reliance on what Retallack deems "naïve realism" and its attendant call "for intellectual and imaginative resignation, a naturalization of normopathic desire" (5). Such realism is "normopathic" because it works by irresponsibly burying difference, contradiction, irrationality--an irresponsibility that, Retallack notes, "is never benign" (19). Harryman's work, in contrast, remains open to radical difference. It engages with processes of social learning by rethinking the production and dissemination of knowledge. The realism of Harryman's work lies not in a normative reenactment of past events but rather in its existence as a thought experiment through which the past and its connection to the present moment are reconfigured. It is characterized by the ability to hold contradictions in interplay and by a willingness to see the overlay of conflicting realities. In *Mirror Play* Harryman turns this exploration toward social-spatial constructions with material consequences in the perpetuation of national violence. Architecture, like language, always has both a form and a social use.<sup>25</sup> Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon recalls that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the architect of the classically modernist Seagram Building in Manhattan, "allowed only white blinds on the plate glass windows and demanded that these be left in only one of three positions, open, shut, or half-way" (28)--the building's design quite literally controlling the personal lives that inhabited its space; viewing tenants either as children to be guided or as subjects on whom to experiment, modernist architects positioned themselves apart from the buildings' interior communities. Postmodernist architecture returns to the idea of community, but now as a decentralized entity with practical needs. And memory is, Hutcheon argues, "central to this linking of the past with the lived" (29).

*Mirror Play's* mise-en-scène is conceptual: as a foyer that has been cut-away from the house, it represents the threshold between public and private, into and out of which "any body" may pass. The "antechamber" is both room and passageway that comes "before" the house, in between the inside and outside. It is a room defined only in relation to other rooms, not as a place in itself (and in vocalized performance the word slides between antechamber and anti-chamber). But in *Mirror Play* the antechamber has been torn away from the house, destroying the relation that constitutes its identity; here the antechamber is not a room but a moment in the midst of transition from one object (foyer) to another, as yet unknown, resting point. Harryman's approach to architecture is influenced in part by Denis Hollier's notion of "anti-architecture" as a means of getting out from under the authoritarian hierarchies with which architecture is complicit, a condition which led Georges Bataille to deem architecture "society's authorized superego" (ix). Hollier conceptualizes "an architecture that would not inspire, as in Bataille, social good behavior, or would not produce, as in Foucault's disciplinary factory, madness or criminality in individuals" (x). Anti-architecture is therefore an alternative that leads

against the grain to some space before the constitution of the subject, before the institutionalization of subjectivity . . . [or that] would open up a space anterior to the division between madness and reason; rather than performing the subject, it would perform spacing: a space from before the subject, from before meaning; the asubjective, asemanic space of unedifying architecture, an architecture that would not allow space for the time needed to become a subject.

(xi)

Such anti-architecture works as loss or dismantling of the meaning that is assumed to inhere in architectural structures--such as houses, prisons, and tombs, all of which are implicitly or explicitly referenced in *Mirror Play*.<sup>26</sup>

*Mirror Play's* foyer investigates, in part, the penetration of exterior social space into a subject's interiority. But as a space that has been torn away from the house, presumably in an act of violence, the foyer is also what Hollier labels above an "asubjective" space--a space which defies interpretive coherence. In this way, *Mirror Play* enters into the discourse of space and place as they figure interiority/exteriority (from the position of the subject) and insider/outsider (as the position of the subject), which is in part a difference between being from/in a place and belonging to a place. In contrast to what Una Chaudhuri has described as modernist drama's recourse to "a vague, culturally determined symbology of home, replete with all those powerful and empowering associations of space that are organized by the notion of belonging" (xii), *Mirror Play* is organized around a violated home that is also an opening--a condition that acknowledges both the very human desire to belong and the simultaneous violence and promise of belonging. Whereas modernism's drama of the home is built around what Chaudhuri has labeled "a *victimage of location* and a *heroism of departure*," which "structure the plot as well as the plays' accounts of subjectivity and identity" (xii emphasis original), *Mirror Play* articulates the question its unattached foyer invites: "Can the antechamber lose its meaning, its substance, or is it always the same, even if every aspect of it contradicts its defining characteristics?" (191).

## Dispersive Performance and the Theater of Others

According to Jerzy Grotowski, whose efforts to rethink actors' training have influenced Harryman's own approach to performance, the defining feature of theater is the performer-audience relationship (15). But in the postmodern era, the audience is notoriously difficult to characterize. In *The Audience*, theater theorist Herbert Blau discusses the peculiar notion of the postmodern audience, both collective and disparate, joined to one another through a shared experience interpreted in highly individualized ways. Like Harryman, Blau locates the efficacy of postmodernist theater in its challenge to the primacy of ocularcentric knowledge. To position understanding as seeing is, he argues, an ideology that ignores the audience's original auditory role. Postmodern theater audiences are a product of "the vast seduction of the dispersive media" (14) and marked by division, or what Blau describes as "an 'original splitting'" that is "not the image of an original unity but the mysterious rupture of social identity in the moment of its emergence" (10). The postmodern audience is therefore not a certainty--not a community to be joined or a position to be occupied--but rather an effect of performance itself:

The audience . . . is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is *initiated or precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what *happens* when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response.

(25, italics in original)

Blau historicizes the concept of a "public" as a modernist notion that conceptualizes the audience as uniform, understandable, and authorizing--that is, as something that can be figured out and won over. In contrast, postmodernist audiences are indeterminate, with each member experiencing an individual response, an individual identification. Blau dubs this the "*theater of otherness*," as an alternative to the more traditional notion of a theater of essence (94). This "otherness" does not constitute a counterpublic--it is not the disidentificatory community that, for example, José Muñoz discusses in his important study of contemporary minoritarian performance. Rather, it is an interpretive "community" paradoxically marked by discontinuity and dispersion, and formed in spite of (or perhaps because of, or prior to) the foreclosure of normative identification. But while Blau argues that such theater is marked by an oscillation between eye and ear that creates distance *rather than* identification, I want to propose that in Harryman's theater this oscillation forms the basis for an ethics of responsibility *toward* the identifications we form. In this sense, we might think of Harryman's theater not as a theater of otherness but as a theater of others, others to whom we are, for better or worse, ethically bound--a theater in which, to borrow Harryman's language, "[m]e talking fuses to you" ("Property" 16).

If the space of performance is, as Harryman argues in "The Ear of the Poet," a provisional space in which ideas, narratives, and social constructions may be tested, then what's being tested in *Mirror Play* is perhaps not only our methods for making sense of a post-9/11 world but also the very idea that making "sense"--a particular cognitive ordering of experience--is the correct goal. If "making sense" is a narrative proposition, then poetry might provide a different paradigm more suitable to the present world's complex interconnectivities. Poetry might offer, as Retallack asserts, a cognitive alternative to imagining borders and the crossing of lines, allowing us instead to think in terms of fractal geometries and the "swerve," an unpredictable (form of) change that can defamiliarize, disorient, and even estrange by "radically altering geometries of attention," resulting in "an unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain" (1). As interruption, digression, and the unexpected, the swerve is produced in and by hybridity, the vitality of which lies in its inventiveness, in its generativity. The swerve is not an abdication of responsibility but rather the recognition that all events are overdetermined, unpredictable, subject to chance. Swerves "dislodge us," Retallack argues, "from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias" (3). Openness to the unexpected, to generativity, thus becomes a kind of ethics: generosity toward generativity.

Placing such generativity at the heart of an ethics of non-normative obligation takes seriously Geoffrey Galt Harpham's assertion that ethics "does not solve problems, it structures them" (37). The modernist hero narrative, related to the sense of a universal ethical imperative on which ethical discourse has traditionally been founded, has been denounced in the postmodern era as an "ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination" (**Jameson 101**). The paradox of a postmodernist ethics of non-normative obligation, then, is that while it does not posit a hierarchy of interpretive values, it does rely on the categorical imperative of obligation itself. This imperative may, Harpham suggests, be at the center of Derrida's notion of deconstruction itself, seeping into it in the form of the subject who is allowed to

'return' on the condition that it be transformed and modernized--no longer the self-identical, self-regulating subject of humanism, but rather a subject inmixed with otherness. This otherness, Derrida said, would consist not only of the obligation that all people owe to other people, but also of the iron laws, the internal otherness, which we, as speaking animals, harbor within our living consciousnesses.

(Harpham 23)

The paradox of dispersive theater's non-normative obligation embodies the contradiction Harpham locates in ethics itself: the contradiction between "How ought one live?" and "What ought I to do?," the contradiction between the distanced laws of generalizable norms and an individual in an actual (and unique) situation (26). For Harpham the key to ethics is not only the obligation but the *choice* between different ethics (for example, between mercy and retribution). Dispersive theater makes us attentive to these choices, makes us aware that there *are* choices. This is not to say that all choices are equal, but rather that each choice "violates some law or other, and violates it precisely because it is 'ethical'" (29). Dispersive theater is ethical, then, not because it offers a moral order but because it reveals the conditions of choice. *Mirror Play* presents a very postmodern problematic: while the body is materialized through the very act of narrative (including discourse, gesture, and image), narrative is always an imperfect mirror--a necessary framing that inevitably obfuscates, a "view [that] blocks what's behind it" (Harryman "Animal" 33). This presents a particular obstacle to audience members, who are presented with a range of possibilities for mis/recognition, but it also presents a threat to bodies, for violence--in the form of war, rape, social neglect, and government policy--is justified through such mis/recognitions.

And yet, it is the very vulnerability of bodies that leads to claims of "bodily integrity and self-determination" that are, as Judith Butler has pointed out, "essential to so many political movements" (25). "The body," Butler continues,

implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. Indeed, if I deny that prior to the formation of my 'will,' my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself, if I build a notion of 'autonomy' on the basis of the denial of this sphere of a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then am I denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy?

(26)

Here, Butler helps us understand the vulnerability of the body in the public realm, a vulnerability of both its physicality and its identity. This mentally and physically projected "external" body inevitably figures one's internal subjectivity as well. And yet in figuring this subjectivity as autonomous, Butler argues, we do violence to those others on whose denial that autonomy is based. As Harryman asserts, "I" is not the measure; it is the "interference" ("Acker" 36). But it is necessary interference.

Dispersive theater may, in fact, represent a new chapter in the history of anti-theatricality. Anti-theatricality in the twentieth century has frequently indicated, at least in part, a desire to distance ourselves from the influence of the mass audience, who may pressure us respond differently than we might otherwise do. Mimetic acts are, moreover, repugnant because they allow us to enjoy the suffering of others. But dispersive theater employs what might be called a flexible theatricality, whereby the value of the theater collectivity fluctuates between coercion and responsibility, between the awareness that narrative is, at best, imperfect and that meaning must nevertheless be made. Dispersive theater thus embraces the stage, but in a different way, avoiding spectacle and emphasizing the poetic, not as a direct route to the emotions but as a social tool.

To return to Harryman's account of the Iraqi pin performance, the woman who interpreted the wearing of the pin as an admission of a secret understood, at least subconsciously, that she was both actor and acted upon. Taking Harryman's pin as the revelation of a guilty secret was perhaps a conditioned response: the only way she could make sense of the performance within a political context characterized by a nationalist narrative drive toward "mission accomplished." And yet in responding with a secret of her own, she demonstrated a deeply felt, if unexpected, empathy that operated according to a set of interpretive conditions not determined by borders or even by autonomy. She too felt the vulnerability of her body in public; she too suffered a social policing that ultimately figured her subjectivity.

In avoiding narratives of witness, of moral imperative, of political identity, the Iraqi pin performance was certainly not a call to action. But for the woman who revealed her own secret, and certainly for Harryman as well, it was a moment of unexpected connection. It is probably too much to imagine this moment as a swerve away from terror, as a swerve toward hope, but it may perhaps remind us that there is far more to every event than any story can express. Generosity toward the generativity of imperfect mirrorings and unexpected identifications becomes a way of opening ourselves up to other possibilities of connection beyond explanation, justification, and non-contradiction. Poet's theater may not result in the dissolution of atmosphere or of *atmos*-fear, but as it swerves between them, it has the potential to encourage critical discussion and collective interpretation in which no one is "right" but in which difference proliferates.

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## Footnotes

- 1.** Harryman finds in RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art*, for example, the implication that once performance has served its function as a testing ground that can release the art object from categorical or conventional constraints, the art object is reinstated and performance is retired.
- 2.** For a discussion of the dramaturgical method for analyzing impression management, see Goffman's *Presentation 238*. Notably, Goffman focuses entirely on the performer without any attention to the audience's active role in the meaning-making process.
- 3.** Reptile seems to be recognizing here what Erving Goffman has termed "disclosive compensation"—the theatrical convention of giving the audience what it needs, and *only* what it needs, in order to construct and maintain the dramatic fiction. See his *Frame Analysis* 142.
- 4.** For a discussion of the "turn to the visual," see Jay.
- 5.** See Vickery chapter 7 for an excellent discussion of, especially, the gendered-ness of theory in Language writing.
- 6.** Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* was the first book-length historical account of Language writing and remains a key text for understanding this history, but the SFPT receives no critical attention there (despite the fact that Perelman himself wrote for the SFPT). Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies* and Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender* offer alternative, feminist-inflected histories of Language writing, but both attend to "performance" only in a sense of the performance of social identities. Vickery acknowledges the divisions between visual artists and writers that characterized the Bay Area in the 1970s (33), but despite her interest in documenting the broader range of activities carried out by women in the Language community than has been commonly acknowledged, she too leaves out critical

discussion of Harryman's (or anyone else's) theater work, choosing instead to focus on Harryman's and Hejinian's important collaborative novel *The Wide Road* (see Vickery final chapter). Recently, *The Grand Piano* series has started to address some of this history (see in particular vol. 6).

**7.** See the *Grand Piano* website page on the SFPT for a partial list of plays as well as for links to some program, poster, and production images: <http://www.thegrandpiano.org/poetstheater.html>.

**8.** For play texts, see *Hills* 9 (1983). For criticism and commentary on the SFPT and related theater, see Kennedy and Tuma, *Mantis* 3 (2002), and *Poetics Journal* 5 (May 1985): 122-138.

**9.** Poets and Language writers were not the only ones to downplay key aspects of poet's theater. The disciplinary divide rendering the SFPT invisible was, if anything, worse on the side of visual artists. As Ann Vickery writes, "the arts were strongly differentiated in the Bay Area during the seventies. Although performance-based poets like Carla Harryman encouraged visual artists to attend readings and talks, poetry was still presumed to be too tied to the page and thus limiting. Harryman recalls a young and prominent artist dismissing Language writings as 'just a version of surrealism'" (32-33). Harryman's work was thus trapped in both a practical and a critical disciplinary blind spot.

**10.** It is remarkable how much this critique of poetry scholarship and the expressivist lyric sounds like the critique by contemporary Performance Studies scholars of traditional object-oriented scholarship, in which the objective, disinterested scholar remains separate from the object of study that he (and in this critique, the scholar is usually a he) describes and interprets in terms that place the object easily within the dominant worldview.

**11.** Performed as part of the annual Poets Theater festival, which is produced by Small Press Traffic each January and/or February.

**12.** The showcase, entitled "Returning from One Place to Another," was produced by Links Hall and curated by John Beer.

**13.** See especially volume 6 of that series.

**14.** Bourdieu argues that "depositories of deferred thoughts...can be triggered off at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture which *recalls* the associated thoughts and feelings, in one of the inductive states of the body which, as actors know, give rise to states of mind" (69).

**15.** This is because the syntax of gesture and speech are different. Speech builds up its meaning out of independently meaningful parts. Gesture on the other hand becomes meaningful only in the aggregate. Speech is spread out, and each part can be analyzed separately, but a gesture is "synthetic," compressing its semantic components (actor, action, path) into one symbol: "Thus, when gesture and speech combine, they bring into one meaning system two distinct semiotic architectures. Each modality, because of its unique semiotic properties, can go beyond the meaning possibilities of the other" (**McNeill and Duncan 144**).

**16.** For more on modernist anti-theatricality and its relationship to gesture, see Puchner chapter 1.

**17.** Dir. Catharine Sullivan. Produced by the Renaissance Society and performed at Experimental Station, Chicago, March 7, 2008.

**18.** Cognitive psychology, incidentally, supports this view. Cognitive psychologists David McNeill and Susan D. Duncan have developed the concept of the "growth point" (GP), originated by McNeill, as an analytical framework for the combination of "imagery and linguistic categorical content" that insists on an understanding of both gesture and speech as "material carriers of thinking" (144, 155). In this view, speech and gesture are not "the packaged communicative outputs of a separate internal production process but rather...the joint embodiments of that process itself" (155). Speech-gesture combinations do not simply reflect already formed similarities, then, but contribute to the

establishment a correspondence between the two and are therefore productive of thought. Furthermore, McNeill and Duncan argue, GPs "are a way of cognitively existing, of cognitively being, at the moment of speaking. By performing the gesture, the core idea is brought into concrete existence and becomes part of the speaker's own existence at that moment" (156). In this view, gesture is not an expression of being but rather constitutive of being, and in this sense, we can consider gesture performative. It is also significant that although a GP is highly synchronous, "strongly resist[ing] forces trying to divide it" (145), this synchrony "is disrupted...if speech and gesture are drained of meaning through repetition; i.e., such that GPS may be circumvented in their production" (145). See McNeill and Duncan.

**19.** The play, which has been performed in San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, and Tübingen, Germany, has never been published. Each production uses a different version of the script (in some cases bilingual). Some performances have used a full cast (Detroit, Chicago), while others have consisted only of Harryman herself reading the text to live musical accompaniment by John Raskin (San Francisco). All of these versions, however, are formed out of the full-length English text entitled "Mirror Play" included in Harryman's "Poets Theater Plays" manuscript.

**20.** *Mirror Play* page references are from Harryman's unpublished typescript entitled "Poets Theater Plays."

**21.** Notably, the AIDS quilt grew out of a simple, non-narrative performance as San Francisco marchers carried placards with the names of men lost to AIDS. It was only with the durable AIDS Memorial Quilt that individual micro-narratives began to be incorporated in the form of images, quotations, and other forms of characterization.

**22.** Performed at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in the Detroit suburb of Ferndale, Michigan, on August 14, 2005.

**23.** In both productions, the jaw harp was played by John Raskin, who also composed all of the music. Harryman comments: "Initially, I had conceived of *Mirror Play* as a poly-vocal piece for one performer: I liked the idea of one performer working with multiple voices within the conceptual antechamber space. However, that one immediately turned into two as I felt that an instrumental voice needed to be an aspect of the speaking voice. I started working with Jon Raskin, developing the piece for spoken voice (mine) and jaw harps. Now the poly-vocality is being extended to many voices and more instruments" (Hinton).

**24.** Perlstein discusses some of the myths surrounding Fonda's position on the war.

**25.** See Hutcheon 27-36 for a brief but helpful discussion of postmodernism's foundations in architecture.

**26.** Hollier notes that there have been "endless arguments over whether the origin of architecture was the house, the temple, or the tomb, etc. For Bataille it was the prison" (ix).

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## Additional Information

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