

THE BODY POLITIC: FROM MEYERHOLD TO MY BARBARIAN

Farrah Karapetian

Introduction

A period of political rupture such as that in which nation-states find themselves now is by definition a period in which the master narrative of a society is in flux. Populations undergoing such flux are therefore open to new ideas about how to live, and utopianism is never far behind. Creative communities mirror and influence this process. Through the history of theater, especially, and the elastically theatrical visual and literary arts fields, one can witness by turns societal support, dissolution, or rewriting of master narratives. One witnesses this phenomenon specifically in the microcosm of theater and the bodily arts because of the special relationship between audience, author, and actor: the triangle of representation that models that of the state, or of society generally. To which of the vertices is agency ascribed? In Aristotle's time, theater supported the metanarrative of society, relieving the audience of agency; during the Russian Revolution, Vsevolod Meyerhold shifted the weight of agency onto the audience, and his ideas influenced Germans undergoing — and encouraging — rupture at that time as well. Now, the body of artists all over the world has again inherited the premise that using primarily extralinguistic, bodily action, audiences can be encouraged to think and imagine realities alternative to those dissolving around them.

Background

When Aristotle delivered *The Poetics* in the mid-fourth century BCE, he had already waded through notions of virtue in *The Nichomachean Ethics* a decade before. With what was “good” settled, he was able to say decisively that “first and foremost” among the aims of developing tragic characters was, indeed, “that they be good.”¹ Plots were to “involve a change not from bad fortune to good fortune but the other way round, from good fortune to bad, and not thanks to wickedness but because of some mistake of great weight and consequence.”² The goal in Aristotelian theater, thus, was to excite sympathy, pity, and fear among audience members en route to recognition of themselves. Aristotle included the relativity of good character in his text — that is, that good character exists “in each category of persons: a woman can be good, or a slave, although one of these classes (*sc.* women)

1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor, 1978), 43.

2 *Ibid.*, 38.

is inferior and the other, as a class, worthless.” He also wrote that certain types of goodness were “appropriate” to a category of persons; for example, it was inappropriate to Aristotle to render a female character brave. The relative goodness of any one character within this scheme depended on the local society within which a character’s — and viewer’s — category was inscribed. Characters were drafted to reinforce local values.

Brazilian theatrical innovator Augusto Boal honed in on this centuries later in a different context: living in the unstable political conditions of a dictatorship, he did not use theater to reinforce local values. Rather, theater became a context in which to examine these values. In fact, Boal argued that this was not a choice in a revolutionary context, but a necessary condition: with no clear values to support during unstable cultural periods, Aristotle’s conventions of good and evil have no purchase on actors or audiences. Boal explored this in his 1974 writing, *Theatre of the Oppressed*: Greek theater cuts the collective out of drama and focuses on an individual character acting out a perversion of societal mores. The character then necessarily pays for that perversion. The viewers in classical theater passively empathize with the character’s tragic flaw, relate to the character’s actions, and are purified of the antisocial impulse they share with the character through the character’s catastrophic end. The viewers leave the theater ready to uphold society’s norms. Society’s gatekeepers need this process to keep disaffection with inequity at bay. Importantly, Boal said that this “coercive system of tragedy can be used before or after the revolution... but never during it!... During a ‘cultural revolution,’ in which all values are being formed or questioned, [Aristotle’s] system cannot be applied.”³ Why? “For the simple reason that the character’s ethos will not find a clear social ethos it can confront.”

Twenty-first-century governing bodies perform by turns with protectionism and territorial aggression remarkable for the postwar era, and these performances create an atmosphere that increasingly begs questions of the metanarrative of these countries and puts those implicated by citizenship, residency, or commercial association in a position to examine their relationships to the powers that be. Who defines the good for a particular category of people, and who, actually, defines the category? In fact, the last hundred years or so have seen eruptions of coups d’état, revolutions, and civic shifts that can be viewed in isolation or as part of a larger network of power, and the artwork produced during these periods is as linked and as

3 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* [1974], trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York, 1979), Part 1: “Aristotle’s Coercive System of Tragedy, Section 17: Conclusion.” iBooks file.

transnational as are those incidents. With the social ethos shifting worldwide, artwork that inherits its modalities from twentieth-century physical and political theater has likewise inherited the opportunity, if not the mandate, to examine and explore contemporary values and their associated construction, performance, and actors.

Origin Story: Vsevolod Meyerhold

At many of these moments of rupture, some artists have used interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and particularly bodily languages to engage subjects of artworks, and, in turn, audiences, to consider their own notions of civic self. This essay invokes an early reference point for some of these principles and practices in the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, especially in its articulation immediately after the October Revolution (1917). The combined legacy of his and other individuals mentioned here includes their commitment to deconstruct movement, the objects that support movement, the environments in which movement is staged, the narratives that define movement, the values that motivate movement, and the institutions that purport to distribute values — and to do so within a framework of pleasure. (Audiences must be engaged, after all, and conviviality is more convincing than pedantry.) In art as in politics, less is achieved by repeating forms than by revisiting first principles; a paternalistic notion of indebtedness is even less useful. Looking for principles privileged in one artist's work as they pertain to other, later examples can instead have the potential not only to elucidate an artistic framework relevant to moments of political rupture, but also a rhyme between cultures that are otherwise often positioned as antagonists.

Meyerhold is an important reference point because he was working at a time when the entire Russian state was focused on inventing its metanarrative; in transition from a Tsarist to a Bolshevik notion of the individual's relationship to the collective, every aspect of the social order was being reconsidered. His process was, then, not only interdisciplinary but also inter-institutional. His lectures and practice engaged with theater and also all of the categories of the creative arts. Meyerhold raced with his peers to create forums through which people could physically and mentally recast their notions of the good. This is rare. As Alexandro Segade has said of his contemporary practice as an artist on his own as well as with his collective, My Barbarian, an artist's project today may be utopian but is also very singular.⁴ In seeing multiple such utopian practices today, is it

⁴ Segade, Alexandro (artist), in discussion with the author. March 27, 2018.

possible to see a linked set of strategies? Is there a way to imagine a transnational goal among artists to awaken ways to witness and recast the metanarrative of daily life within populations?

Certainly, governments see one. On April 12, 2018, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis testified before the House Armed Services Committee regarding the nationalistic metanarratives solidifying not only in the United States but around the world: he characterized ours as an “era of reemerging long-term great power competition.”⁵ Is that the metanarrative that the people of countries deemed greater or lesser powers accept? What are the categories presumed by such a metanarrative? What is good behavior within such categories? How do artworks exhibit existing contradictions to that metanarrative but also encourage alternatives?

Aristotle set forth a structure and process through which to create a mimetic theatrical environment. This was realism at its most essential: show the people who they are, and they will remain so. Meyerhold argued against this, without referencing Aristotle, *per se*. Mimesis and realism encourage stasis, and what society requires in order to actually uncomfortably recognize itself and move forward is stylization, according to Meyerhold. He studied the “elements by which the masses are moved”⁶ and used a number of strategies that will be described below and are recognizable in the playfully didactic projects of artists working in later moments of political rupture.

The individual body — its training and deployment — is the first and most primary of the devices Meyerhold considers necessary for activating an actor. His studio program for 1916-17 included athletics such as throwing the discus and sailing — not just to develop fit bodies as per socialism’s ideological notions of raising social health standards or encouraging team spirit nor only to engage the physical language of *commedia dell’arte* he so admired, but to specifically raise awareness of how the body articulates movement by deconstructing those movements. At the State Higher Theater Workshop in Moscow, he developed the practical training exercises for actors for which he is particularly well known — “biomechanics” — which involves breaking down recognizable actions into stylized scores of intention, action, and reaction.

This deconstruction of movements enables miming without the actual objects implied by the titles of any one of Meyerhold’s *études*: *Throwing the Stone*, *Shooting the Bow*, or *Stab to the Chest*, for example,

5 News, NBC. “Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Joint Chief Joe Dunford Testify at House Hearing | NBC News.” *YouTube*, 12 Apr. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITprYLtE3ZA.

6 Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* [1867], trans. George Gibian (New York, 1996), 733.

do not have to involve stones, bows, or knives in order to be legible. The biomechanical etudes were not often present onstage, but he also used objects as an aid to mime there,⁷ stylizing them as much as the motions. For example, in his 1922 production of Fernand Crommelynck's *Magnanimous Cuckold*, "Estrugo's writing equipment and the Nursemaid's dustpan and shoe polish were of deliberately exaggerated proportions."⁸ The inflated proportions of a prop — or its absence — influence the body of the performer and are examples of Meyerhold's techniques for stylization.

Meyerhold also wanted his costumes, instead of being authentic, to "harmonize as colour-masses with the background."⁹ The legacy of objects, costumes, and sets that can be referenced in later work is their interactivity, modularity, flexibility of identity, and non-illusionism — insofar as all shifts in their identities during a production happened in front of the viewer. Meyerhold's focus on the body extended necessarily into his perspective on destabilizing the setting in which the bodies acted.

Space and time are not constants during periods of institutional change, and so the objects, costumes, and especially sets that he coordinated responded to that flux. Meyerhold had to think of sets that could be erected anywhere, and that would behave in a playfully utilitarian way rather than a decorative, illusionistic way. He found his solution in 1921 at the first exhibition of the Constructivists, 5x5=25. The work exhibited signaled two salient directions. The first was the death of painting, and specifically mimesis, via Alexander Rodchenko's monochrome paintings meant to reduce "painting to its logical conclusion." With *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, and Pure Blue Color*, Rodchenko "affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation."¹⁰ Lyubov Popova's five paintings indicated a related direction: they were graphic preparations for concrete constructions, and indeed Popova gave up painting and turned to industrial design.

Popova's sets for Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 pull together conventional theater flats, joining them with steps, chutes, and catwalks into a multi-purpose scaffolding easily erected and dismantled. The stage had no wings — no place for actors to hide, no zone in which "acting" began or ended — and much of the setting was flexible in purpose as much as in construction, including blank panels hinged to the framework that could represent doors or windows, or provide space for projection.¹¹ None of this was

7 Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London, 1991 [1969]), 114.

8 Alma Law, "Meyerhold's Production of 'The Magnanimous Cuckold,'" *TDR* 26, no.1 (1982): 61-86 here 67.

9 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 65.

10 Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 238.

11 *Ibid.*, 183-84.

supposed to be the “definitive embodiment of the new theatre, but rather a way out toward the new theatre. Popova was generally of the same opinion.”¹² She said of nonobjective form that she didn’t think it was the final form: “It is a revolutionary state of the form,” she said, anticipating others.

Meyerhold’s biomechanical actions do not have to include language to be legible, either. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, he made the character of Estrugo mute, forcing the actor to mime much of his dialogue; another character, Bruno, occasionally spoke for him.¹³ Meyerhold had seen Otojiro Kawakami’s company in 1902 when it had come to Russia on tour at a moment of political rupture in Japan as well, during the tumultuous rise of the Liberal Party in that country. Kawakami had used the opportunity of the tour to exaggerate traditional kabuki moves, making his New Wave theater even more physical. Kawakami’s decision in this regard was due, in part, to his realization that the Japanese language would be incomprehensible to his diverse audiences; it is interesting, then, that Meyerhold’s appropriation of this Japanese theater was related to Kawakami’s need to interpret: the body speaks where language does not.

Language was not absent from Meyerhold’s productions, though; on the contrary, he treated classic texts as if they were plastic, and even directed productions wherein new texts were re-written with each successive production, such as Mayakovsky’s 1917 *Mystery-Bouffe*, rendered relevant in 1921 for the changed political environment.¹⁴ Language entered Meyerhold’s sets as much as did projection. “What the *modern spectator* wants is the placard, the juxtaposition of the surfaces and shapes of *tangible materials!*” he wrote in *Vestnik teatra* [The Theater Herald] in 1920.

The body that is addressed as a result of all of these acts of deconstruction and reconstruction is not solely the individual one; it is the collective body. Meyerhold’s actors did not have to be experienced, and, in fact, he often used students for this reason. While exhibiting his work in Germany, Meyerhold employed numerous ordinary working people in *Roar China!* and *Commander of the Second Army*, and, conversely, he sent his actors to participate in a workers’ May Day demonstration in Cologne. Art and life, he believed, could and should mingle, and they did.

Finally, crucially, whether justified by his interest in Italian *commedia dell’arte* or otherwise, Meyerhold’s plays were supposed to be

12 Georgii Kovalenko, “The Constructivist Stage,” *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design, 1913-1935* (London, 1991), 152.

13 Law, “Meyerhold’s Production.”

14 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 166.

fun. Meyerhold's insistence on engaging in stylization intentionally impairs an audience's ability to transcend, and thus anticipates and influences Bertolt Brecht's strategies to achieve viewers' estrangement from a production en route to criticality.¹⁵

Legacy: Forward from Meyerhold

Vsevolod Meyerhold was executed as an enemy of Stalin's people in 1940; his notion of the real differed from that of the state he had helped to build. His utopian vision, not to mention those of the larger Russian avant-garde, ended dystopically, but the larger goal had been to create an "artery"¹⁶ between the stage and the spectator, adding a "fourth *creator* in addition to the author, the director, and the actor — namely, the spectator." He was building the active minds of the new citizenry and developing an aesthetic functionally linked to that end. The route to this goal of specialized actor training within the studio school setting is also an important part of his legacy: these actors were not classically trained — they were activated through their bodies. Meyerhold's non-teleological utopian legacy is specifically about the ongoing investigation of what constitutes transformative cultural practice, and how to practice transforming culture.

All mention of Meyerhold's name was suppressed in Russia until two years after Stalin's death.¹⁷ One result of this is that the origin story of twentieth-century critical strategies of performance art and institutional critique is limited to Brecht and Berlin Dada: touchstones within which "form, representation, discourse, and narrative came to be considered political work."¹⁸ To step back just one generation and to Russia rather than Germany shifts that origin story slightly to a place where the body is at stake as a subject and an opportunity. Ideas, though, are stateless. News of all of Meyerhold's innovations had long before reached Bertolt Brecht in Germany.¹⁹ After the Revolution and Civil War, many Russians spent time in Germany, and interest in creative production emerged in German associations, such as the Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Russlands, which published a journal, *Das neue Russland*, in which, in a special edition in 1925, Soviet theater, and especially Meyerhold's theater, was discussed. Meyerhold's former pupil, Sergei Eisenstein, gave lectures at this latter association, and in 1926, the Berlin journal *Die Weltbühne* published a detailed report on Meyerhold's consciously theatrical theater. In 1928, Brecht's friend and colleague Bernhard Reich analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of Meyerhold's episodic style, calling it "Bert Brecht's unrealized dream." Another early point of influence

15 On this, see Katherine Eaton, "Brecht's Contacts With the Theater of Meyerhold," *Comparative Drama* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 3-21.

16 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 59.

17 C. O. Kiebuszinska, "Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre, and: Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia (review)," *Theatre Journal* 48 no. 4 (1996): 519-21. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/tj.1996.0079

18 Andrea Fraser, "My Barbarian by Andrea Fraser - BOMB Magazine," *BOMB Magazine*, 1 Oct. 2003, bombmagazine.org/articles/my-barbarian/.

19 For a detailed analysis of this, see Eaton, "Brecht's Contacts."

occurred in 1930, when Meyerhold brought his ensemble to Germany for its first foreign tour, and Brecht defended their performances against conservative critics.

The creative communities in Berlin and Russia began to migrate. Brecht left Germany, fearing that he would be prohibited to publish or produce his works, and wrote *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in 1941 in Finland. The play chronicles the rise of a fictional 1930s Chicago mobster and is meant as a satirical allegory of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany prior to World War II. Eisenstein traveled to California and then Mexico to make his films, spreading his innovations along that trajectory. Brecht's work's trajectory then moved to the United States, where artists from the Bauhaus had gone to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. At Black Mountain College, writer Eric Bentley worked extensively to publish work by and about Brecht. Bentley also taught at Columbia University from 1952 to 1969 as a professor of dramatic literature.

Allan Kaprow's happenings in the 1950s and 1960s at Black Mountain College would involve an entirely broken fourth wall as well as innovative uses of projection. Trisha Brown in New York was inspired by the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, both of Black Mountain College. She is famous for her work deconstructing everyday motions and her early experience with the Judson Group deglamorizing the theatrical atmosphere by refusing to utilize music, sets, or costumes. (Brown also embraced sets and music at different turns in her career, though she never took them for granted.) Her *Equipment Pieces* of 1968 involve ropes, pulleys, and mechanical devices that would have delighted Lyubov Popova, and her work in 1971, *Accumulation*, is a beautiful group etude in and of itself, with dancers' small, singular gestures accumulating to create a remarkable pattern.

Brown and Kaprow's work is part of the larger American creative response generated in the contest for American values of the late 1960s, which also includes Bruce Nauman in fine art and Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainier, and Anna Halprin in postmodern dance. In art history, this bodily trajectory complicates the hegemonic narrative of High Modernism in New York in 1968. In painting, Frank Stella reached an anti-illusionistic conclusion similar to Rodchenko's in 1921, and painting did not exist in a bubble for either of these generations. The work of New York's movement-oriented artists alludes to the constructivist argument that art needs turn to construction out of the deconstruction of everyday life at moments of political rupture.

The analytic nature of this work disrupts transcendence in its audience, activating viewers to consider the dynamics of space and the body without the dramatic phrasing and resolution characteristic of earlier dance.

This activation of viewership began to happen in Latin America as well, and the network of ideas doesn't fray, here. Kaprow, when living in New York, collaborated with the Argentine artist Marta Minujín; Trisha Brown's Dance Company in New York provided Chilean artist Sylvia Palacios Whitman a foundation for the innovative performance she developed; and Eric Bentley taught Augusto Boal at Columbia before Boal returned to his native Brazil to work with the Arena Theatre in São Paulo.

In 1964, a coup d'état in Brazil began twenty-one years of dictatorship in that country, premised on the notion of providing executive power to ostensibly restore internal order and international prestige. It led to purges of oppositional figures and intellectuals, austerity measures, and total militarization and technocracy. Thus, when Augusto Boal staged Brecht's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* there in 1970, its implications challenged the contemporary military-industrial leadership in his country. On his way home from the theater, he was kidnapped, tortured, and exiled.

When Boal was then a fugitive traveling throughout South America, he developed an active notion of the spectator — or “spect-actor” — to contradict the power dynamics of his time. This ushered in a period of theatrical action from the “Invisible Theatre” he practiced in Peru in 1974 to his actual election as Rio's city councilor in 1992. Whether as an audience member rushing onstage to solve the social problem introduced by the theatrical company, as in Rio de Janeiro, or as a patron seated in the restaurant of the Chiclayo Hotel in Peru in the 1970s, listening to an actor (who did not reveal himself as such) pose questions concerning the salaries of the hotel's various laborers and instigating all-night conversation about class differences, “the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place.” On the contrary, the theater transfers the “means of production in the theater to the people themselves.”²⁰

Legacy: Aspects of Physical Theater in the Expanded Field

Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile, which all experienced military coups and political instability, had governments that used force to

²⁰ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Part 4: “Poetics of the Oppressed, Section 11: Experiments with the People's Theater in Peru.” iBooks file.

create and maintain stable metanarratives. The arts pushed back, strongly suggesting the absurdity of those narratives, the hypocrisy of the media as a public square, and the impossibility of identifying with popular characters. As Peruvian critic Juan Acha wrote in 1970, “[c]ultural values, the mainstay of the dominant class, are in decline — not man, not culture.” He said that young people didn’t want to replace the values of a dominant class with those of the dominated; rather, “[t]hey want freedom.”²¹

Acha actually pushed for art that engaged in the South American geometric tradition as he moved away from social realism.²² Yet, indeed, across Latin America, many artists, in this attempt to wake up a political viewership, turned to many of the same strategies that had emerged in Meyerhold’s studio school in the late 1910s. Boal’s deconstruction of the fourth wall and focus on the collective body operated under explicit anti-Aristotelian paradigms, criticizing the political and social status quo. Other artists during this period used means other than political theater as such to configure the individual body as an arbiter of the authenticity of the experience of this work, and the collective body — or the collectivization of bodies other than through authoritarian means — as its endgame.

Marta Minujín called costumes, sets, actors, texts, and audiences into question through the body. In her 1965 piece *Leyendo las noticias* (*Reading the News*), for example, she wrapped herself in sections of newspaper, read sections of it, and then entered the Río de la Plata, letting the news disintegrate. She also used live television as a stage with no wings, as in a piece that aired on *La campana del cristal* (*The Glass Bell*): mayhem ensued in the wake of a comedically ambitious arrangement of horses dragging cans of paint across mattresses, musclemen popping balloons, and rock musicians being wrapped up in adhesive tape. The television channel panicked and tried to get Minujín off the air. “I made things for television ... There are things at the popular level, not at the aesthetic level of museums and galleries,” she said.²³ When societal values are in flux, physical theater reveals their flaws. In this case, the rhyme between the media and the message is evidenced through a breakdown of media taking place live.

Fifteen years later, in 1979, Argentina was in the middle of its *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, or *el Proceso* (*the Process*), otherwise known as the last military junta or the last dictatorship, the period that generated the phenomenon of *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared), and in which basic civil liberties and political parties

21 Juan Acha, “La Revolución Cultural,” *Oiga*, no. 386, Year VIII (August 14, 1970), <http://post.at.moma.org/sources/37/publications/304>

22 Rita Eder, “Juan Acha: A Latin American Perspective on Art,” *Voices of Dissent: Art in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1976 to 1989* | *Post* (27 Sept. 2016), post.at.moma.org/content_items/749-juan-acha-a-latin-american-perspective-on-art.

23 Marta Minujín, interview with John King, Buenos Aires, September 1978, in John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires, 2007), 362, qtd. in Catherine Spencer, *Performing Pop: Marta Minujín and the Argentine Image-Makers*, Tate Papers, no. 24 (Autumn 2015). http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/24/performing-pop-marta-minujin-and-the-argentine-image-makers#footnote25_619f2qj

were suppressed. That year, Minujín created *Edible Obelisk* in the center of Buenos Aires: shaped like the obelisk erected in 1936 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the city's founding, it was constructed with 30,000 loaves of panettone, which were given to a crowd of 50,000 people to eat ten days after its erection.²⁴ This was no utopian picnic. Although Minujín's goals were to "eat the myth ... de-sacralize the myth... make the old myth fail... [and] make room for the new myth,"²⁵ there was not enough panettone for the crowd, and some people wanted more than one sweet bread. She ended up hiding in the crane used to construct and deconstruct her obelisk, and then using it to stand the obelisk up vertically again as people hung on. As this was dangerous, firemen hosed the people off the obelisk, and made the area dark; people went home, and a week later the panettone factory owner died of a heart attack. Minujín's stage was not a theater, but her productions were what she emphatically called "ephemeral art" — the "art of the instant in which the individual lives, not the thing. A society's art in constant change cannot be by any means a static image."

This is bodily work, focused on site and object as they pertain to a populist kind of comedic performance. It was not an isolated event during this period, nor exclusive to Central and South America. Another example is the work of Sylvia Palacios Whitman. Whitman was born in Chile and came to New York in the early 1960s, where she found her way to performance with Trisha Brown. Whitman's piece of 1977, *Passing Through*, is both minimal and maximal, using props, such as enormous gloves, enlarged even more than Meyerhold's had been in *The Magnanimous Cuckhold* to exaggerate her body's movement. Yet another example is Brazilian artist Martha Araujo's *Para Um Corpo Nas Suas Impossibilidades*, a participatory installation: the visitor wears a sculptural bodysuit. The bodysuit has Velcro, which sticks to a carpeted ramp as the visitor — or perhaps "spect-actor" — moves. Of course, the difficulty in navigating the ramp causes participants to question their bodies' relationship to space, and when one participates alongside another visitor, both are prompted to question their relationships to one another and the larger collective. In Mexico, where the 1990s were marked by upheaval, from border politics to a devalued peso, Eduardo Abaroa created a piece that exhibits some of the values of Russian Revolutionary object-sets — modularity, portability, everyday materials, and fun — in his *Portable Broken Obelisk*. It is a hot pink plastic and steel reference to Barnett Newman's inverted Egyptian obelisk of 1967 (dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr.

24 Minujín got the panettone and the funding for the construction from a buyer of one of her paintings, who owned a panettone factory. This should dispel the myth that ephemeral artists do not make saleable objects.

25 Marta Minujín and Richard Squires, "Eat Me, Read Me, Burn Me: The Ephemeral Art of Marta Minujín," *Performance Magazine*, no. 64 (Summer 1991): 19-28.

in 1968 after his assassination), thereby reinterpreting two “classic” texts. It was designed to be mounted as are Mexico City’s nomadic markets — on wheels.

The artworks just described do not purport to be theater, and thus do not follow narrative traditions that derive or explicitly depart from Aristotle’s precedent. They do, however, describe the artist as a new social actor: one whose role is to reveal the theater of media, of public space, and of societal relationships rather than to allow those sites and dynamics to remain silent and neutral, their rigged nature unacknowledged. Through comedic, bodily participation, they reveal the idea that all of society has turned into an Aristotelian drama, designed to make all civic participants toe perverse, stable lines.

Problematic Examples after Communism

The work that prefigures a societal rupture may be less of a deliberate attempt to create a new character or social order than it is to recognize where in fact the individual stands within the cracking façade of the old. There is something of the Aristotelian in this, despite the poetry of its protest.

Sanja Iveković’s *Triangle 2000+* is an example of this phenomenon, made thirteen years before Yugoslavia dissolved. Tito’s motorcade was scheduled to drive by her apartment in Zagreb. She triangulated herself between a lookout stationed on the roof of the hotel across the street and a policeman in the street below, bringing some whiskey, cigarettes, and books onto her balcony, and pretended to masturbate. Soon, an official rang her doorbell and ordered her to “remove all persons and objects from the balcony.”²⁶ She elected to perform everyday actions in the theater of her balcony, exposing the farce of privacy and the very real roles played by all involved. The piece calls the ethos of the state into question. Anyone would empathize with her and reflect on whether one should masturbate on one’s balcony when the dictator is driving by. This is the coercive response of tragedy’s audience, and if one trusts Boal — and the trajectory of the Yugoslavian state — it is true: it didn’t fall apart in 1979.

When the centralized cultural policy of the Soviet Union and East Germany began to relax in the late 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that artists had been working on underground projects not sanctioned by the state all along. What this means is that the social

26 Sanja Iveković, in *Grammar of Freedom/Five Lessons: Works from the Arteast 2000+ Collection*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 48-49 (Moscow, 2015).

ethos — the values of those regions' characters — was not as stable as had been largely perceived or as governments had wanted them to be seen. Producers of Intermedia I, the first large-scale performance art festival in East Germany to receive official permission, were ultimately punished for having produced a popular event.²⁷ At the festival, Lutz Dammbeck showed a phase of his *Hercules Concept*, which was a live collaboration with dancer Fine Kwiatkowski weaving together film, dance, sculpture, sound, and language. At this point in the dissolution and reimagination of the German metanarrative, the piece demonstrated anything but cultural resolve. Instead, in fact, the piece continued to evolve for a decade, exploring the “responsibility of each individual to work for artistic freedom and individual autonomy and against the adaptation of the individual in the interests of other powers.”²⁸

With no clear social ethos to support, the Aristotelian tragedy and its coercive catharsis give way to artworks with no resolution and, at the same time, no punishing authority. In 1997, “when Bulgaria lay at the crossroads of the capitalist and socialist camps,”²⁹ Kalin Serapionov directed a short film called *The Museum — Cause of Meeting and Acquaintance*. It shows a very human kind of institutional critique: two people meet wandering through the National Art Gallery in Sofia and have sex in a bathroom. The institution and all it represents is their theater; their sex describes life's urgency more than do the dead metanarratives in the museum around them. They aren't caught. One identifies with their priorities as one would in Aristotelian tragedy, but the punishment is, if anything, existential: the catastrophe is that there is no catastrophe.

In a sense, the social ethos with which the audience is expected to identify in this case is the shared notion that there is no social ethos, that history is elastic, and that historically valorized institutions are not the construct by the measure of which one can evaluate one's own place in the world. This is the kind of artwork that sits between the critical Aristotelian mirroring of Meyerhold's *Triangle* and his hyperoptimistic call to arms, and there are many artworks like it from the place and the period. The artworks do return to the body, do use hyperbolic physical actions and broken fourth walls (with respect to the confines of any one medium) to estrange viewers from the notion of representation and enable them to think about their lives, but the questions they raise have more to say about the break-up of collective identity than its construction.

27 Sara Blaylock, “Performing the Subject, Claiming Space: Performance Art in 1980s East Germany,” *Voices of Dissent: Art in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1976 to 1989* | *Post*, 1 Aug. 2017, post.at.moma.org/content_items/1035-performing-the-subject-claiming-space-performance-art-in-1980s-east-germany.

28 “Lutz Dammbeck. Herakles Konzept (1977-1987),” *Weserburg*, 2015, www.weserburg.de/index.php?id=845.

29 Iveković, in *Grammar of Freedom*, 92-93.

One example is work by Vladimir Kupriyanov, such as his *Cast me not away from your presence*, a photograph of workers taken from a factory newspaper. He cut the photographs into seven pieces, separating the workers from one another. These kinds of artworks do not practice transforming culture, even as they reflect a transforming culture.

Contemporary Questions

Major events from 1991 to 2001 — the Soviet Union’s dissolution, NAFTA’s initiation, Israel’s positioning with respect to Palestine, and the immediate use of the destruction of New York’s World Trade Center to position Americans in a defensive, nationalistic posture — mark a decade of change on the level of these states, but also a ripple effect in culture: values were being formed as much as they were being questioned.

Artist collectives like My Barbarian in America and Chto Delat in Russia create playfully didactic environments in which to form values and question them. Artists like Yoshua Okón in Mexico create engagement strategies with laborers in which to do that. The subject of the artwork does not sit and wait to be represented, nor does its audience sit and wait to observe and agree or disagree with its premise. It is a dynamic process that relies on the creators’ voices to lead but which succeeds because of the specifics of the subject’s and/or (if they’re different) audience’s contribution.

My Barbarian, a performance art collective based between Los Angeles and New York, created the Post-Living Ante-Action Theater (PoLAAT) within which this process can unfold — a name that alludes to both Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s Living Theater founded in 1947 and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s work at the Action Theater and Anti-Theater in the late 1960s. Moreover, Jade Gordon, one of the three core members of the collective, with Alexandro Segade and Malik Gaines, focused on Boal in graduate school. Their PoLAAT functions by means of five categories of techniques: 1. Estrangement; 2. Indistinction; 3. Suspension of Beliefs — called “Do you believe what you see?” when the group practices in religious countries like Egypt or Israel; 4. the “Mandate to Participate,” which encourages audiences to contribute to the artwork, and 5. Inspirational Critique.³⁰ These principles guide improvisations with participants that help them ease into provocative revelations with both the irony of twenty-first-century hindsight and the sincerity of faith. Reflecting on these principles at a practice for one such performance at the ICA Philadelphia, Malik Gaines said, “Each

30 This is a take, of course, on the concept of “institutional critique.”

show is a rehearsal for a better life.”³¹

My Barbarian's practice of sophisticated play began in 2000 in the context of the rock music venue, where audiences “are not seated or passive but are actively talking back to you.”³² This evolved into a broad interrogative practice that takes some license with



Brecht's notion that didactic theater is more effective when it is entertaining. Indeed, in 2013 they produced a version of Brecht's *The Mother*, using masks to rotate between characters and gestures to speak to the contemporary audience to augment Brecht's words. Often, though, the group elects its contemporary spectacle from music videos, television, and self-help, among many other addictive pop cultural treats.³³ The writing is always excellent, but the self-consciously hand-made and, therefore, accessible sets and costumes, the mannered way of speaking, and the body language communicate both entertaining footholds and an intellectual pull towards self-criticism, cultural criticism, and further questions that incite the building of a new social self.

The artistic expression of the Mexican artist Yoshua Okón, coalesced in the wake of NAFTA. He immediately remarked on the trade agreement's impact on labor practices through increasingly physically installed video work, often engaging real people in the activity depicted, unpacking everyday motions associated with their life experience, and in so doing attracting his viewership to consider their own relationships to Mexico's politics and international relations. His projects engage the subjects of political experience in the process of their own representation. For example, in *Octopus*, former combatants from the Guatemalan Civil War crawl across the gravel of the Home Depot parking lot in California where they now solicit work, reenacting their former battles, inverting the performance of America's Civil War reenactors, who did not fight in that war but do crawl over the land where blood was spilled.

My Barbarian's adaptation of *The Mother* by Bertolt Brecht, performance on July 13 and August 17, 2013. Running time approximately 45 minutes. Inventory #MBB142. Courtesy of Vielmetter Los Angeles. Photo Credit: Oliver Walker.

31 “My Barbarian at ICA: The Mandate to Participate — ICA Philadelphia,” Institute of Contemporary Art - Philadelphia, PA, 2012, icaphila.org/miranda/2565/my-barbarian-at-ica-the-mandate-to-participate.

32 Andrea Fraser, “My Barbarian by Andrea Fraser - BOMB Magazine,” *BOMB Magazine*, 1 Oct. 2003, bombmagazine.org/articles/my-barbarian/.

33 Jade Gordon in Fraser, “My Barbarian by Andrea Fraser.”



My Barbarian's adaptation of *The Mother* by Bertolt Brecht, performance on July 13 and August 17, 2013. Running time approximately 45 minutes. Inventory #MBB142. Courtesy of Vielmetter Los Angeles. Photo Credit: Oliver Walker.

The site of *Octopus* is a question in itself, in fact: for example, if the stage where the Guatemalans reenacted their battles were Guatemala, would it be as noticeable? Does the dissonance between action and site not clarify questions about the war they fought, as well as the war they are fighting — for the

human right to pursue labor to earn food and live in peace? This is the expanded stage that Meyerhold encouraged, in this case generating meaning of the environment beyond the May Day parade.

Along similar lines, on May 24, 2003, a group of artists, architects, critics, and scholars based in St. Petersburg, Russia, carried out an action entitled “The Foundation of Saint Petersburg” during the 300th anniversary celebrations of that city. They left the city by train, holding signs indicating that they were refounding the city, and distributing leaflets and delivering speeches inviting citizens to think of themselves as such, rather than as consumers. They looked for a place to found the new city center and decided it was the police station where they were detained.³⁴ At this point, the Russian Federation was twenty-nine months into its second president — Vladimir Putin — whose language from his very first televised appearances even before he was empowered as president was that “of a leader who was planning to rule with his fist.”³⁵ It was a month after liberal politician Sergei Yushenkov had been shot in the chest four times. For many reasons, this founding of the new center of St. Petersburg was intended as an artifact of contradiction to the dominant narrative of the Kremlin, the statements of which concerning the tercentennial were adamantly positive and focused on the European Union.³⁶

This action was also the founding action of Chto Delat, the collective still based in St. Petersburg that works with politicized knowledge production through video and theater plays, radio programs,

34 Chto Delat, “Artiom Magun // The Refoundation of Petersburg – Chtodelat.org,” Chtodelat.org, 20 Aug. 2013, chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/c1-1-what-is-to-be-done/the-refoundation-of-petersburg/.

35 Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York, 2013), 49. ibooks file

36 “On the Day of the 300th Anniversary of St Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin Gave an Interview to the Local Media.” *The Kremlin*, 27 May 2003, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/30199.

murals, public campaigns, and especially its School of Socially Engaged Art. The collective's aim is not to answer questions for the people with whom it works on projects but to provide space for mutual learning. Its use of the master class format engages the collective body in the reimagination of the Russian citizen



today, as well as, through its traveling projects, the reimagination of metanarratives everywhere it goes. Its film-performance *The Excluded in the Moment of Danger* is an example of a collaboration with the school's graduates using a great deal of body language in addition to written and oral language, in Russian and English. Largely, that body language embodies the dynamics of danger.

Octopus, 2011. Video projection and stools. 4 channels. Dimensions: variable. Courtesy: Yoshua Okón and PROYECTOSMON-CLOVA.

These three artists or art collectives — based in the United States, Mexico, and Russia, respectively — are very active transnationally, feeding off the very state and market power their work erodes and disabling the notion of the stabilization of the ethos of any one place by moving their work from state to state, on and off the market. They represent a surge towards the utopian notion that art can not only reveal inequity, the effects of which are suppressed by existing power structures, but also provoke change. In order to do that, they each rely often on movement and a plastic relationship to all other aspects of the stage. Their goal, like those earlier practitioners and as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is to pose questions of values perceived to be stable, and of the institutions that purport to distribute values. They pose these questions within a framework of pleasure. According to My Barbarian's Jade Gordon, the form of this work is oftentimes the forum itself, even when that forum results in artifacts of performance that can be exhibited, bought, and sold.

The policies of the changing states solidified over the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century, creating protectionist

atmospheres within which atrocities like the bombing of Gaza in 2014 could occur. This was an “enough” moment for an Israeli artist like Deville Cohen, as were the Russian actions in Ukraine, which occurred at a turning point in the life and career of a Russian artist like Polina Kanis, and Trump’s election, which is a catalyst for an American artist like Madeline Hollander. While these artists have no fixed collectives, their work isolates and unpacks aspects of state and market power through extra-linguistic bodily movement that estranges viewers from their sense of the familiar and usually involves multiple actors.

In *Formal Portrait*, Polina Kanis addresses the culture of parades and mass processions as a powerful instrument in national coherence. Other of her works address fitness instruction, elementary school education, and gender identity, implicitly questioning, one-by-one, each of the aspects of Russians’ sense of self today. The concision of each video allows Kanis to avoid the theatrical character arc that enables resolution. In “The Lesson,” for example, a video from 2011, Kanis uses only a whistle to communicate with a classroom of young children. She does not say, for example, that children in Russia are programmed to respond to a region of a map with words like “beautiful” or “large,” but when she whistles the question rather than asking it with words and still gets such responses, one is left to wonder how one feels about the children’s indoctrination, and about education in general. These children are being fed the dominant social ethos. Artwork that polemicalizes this condition can make an effort to jog us out of received pedagogy.

The Xeroxes, video projections, dancers, and wood sets in Deville Cohen’s works are his effort to interrupt reality, to both remind an audience of and relieve it of “poorly designed systems of representation, identification, social order, and common sense.”³⁷ He, like Meyerhold, might cry utilitarian, but the Xeroxed cars on hairy legs, the hairy nipples being waxed, the repetitions of day-glow balls, etc., all break his own, his dancers’, and his audiences’ relationship to conventional representation and therefore remind them to think for themselves. There is no illusionism in his work. The constructions and choreographies, stages and photographic frames are designed to insist that he, his dancers, and his audiences become aware of “the dynamics, and therefore the politics” of the internal mechanisms of not only the work but also the cultural contexts from which the objects dancing on stage derive.

37 Deville Cohen, “<https://devillecohen.art/about/>”.

In the summer of 2014, Cohen, who has lived between Berlin and New York for much of his adult life, was installing work in Tel Aviv during Netanyahu's attacks on Gaza. He marks that summer as the one in which his self-reflexive sculptural and performative vocabulary began explicitly to reflect an urgent and explicit invitation to political conversation, as when he stood inside a paper rollercoaster and chose rather than to sing a David Bowie song, to sing *Winter '73*, an Israeli protest song written in the '90s by the generation born after the war of 1972, reminding their parents that they had promised peace and safety, but that twenty years later, the youth are still fighting the same war. For Cohen, "it is a song about taking and claiming responsibility, pointing a blaming finger at the system of war, and saying, 'enough.'"³⁸

Conclusion

The radical theater experiments of the early twentieth century did not fail to have an impact on society; Meyerhold's achievements contributed to conditions that stabilized the social ethos in Russia under Stalin and then disabled further experimentation there, but the ideas traveled elsewhere — from Russia to Germany, North America, Latin America, etc. Society does change, if not once and for all. As Yevgeny Zamyatin said in *We*, his novel of 1924, "And how can there be a final revolution? There is no final one. The number of revolutions is infinite. The last one — that's for children. Infinity frightens children and it's essential that children get a good night's sleep."³⁹

Artwork can raise new questions about reality when it playfully renders reality itself abstract, from the body to the setting in which the body is positioned. Meyerhold's arguments for stylization sometimes outstrip his real contribution, as a teacher, thinker, and a director: the notion that artwork is a means through which to activate the body politic, through people's bodies and *then* their minds. Using him as a reference point at all for art's work of stoking political agency — all that means is that sometimes it works, if only too well.

Farrah Karapetian is an artist and thinker based in California, whose subject is individual agency in the face of totalizing forces. Her artwork is held by multiple public collections, and her methods incorporate sculptural and performative means of achieving imagery that refigures the medium of photography around bodily experience. She has received fellowships from the Fulbright Program, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the California Community Foundation, and the Center for Cultural Innovation. Her writing about visual and civic experience has been recognized by multiple publications and by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

38 Deville Cohen, in discussion with the author; April 10, 2018.

39 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* [1924], trans. Clarence Brown (New York, 1993), Record 30: "The Final Number Galileo's Mistake Wouldn't It Be Better?" iBooks file.