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Theatre as Metaphor



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Editor's Statement

Theatre as Metaphor Setting the Scene

This issue of *Art Lies* is situated between theatre and theatricality or, in more direct terms, between the theatre and its metaphors. The trigger for this inquiry was the result of the continued disdain for—and obsession with—theatrical tropes that preoccupy certain strains of contemporary artistic practice, as traced by a series of exhibitions over the past year that attempted to frame this phenomenon. These included *City Stage* at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, *Damaged Romanticism* at Blaffer Gallery in Houston, *Fressen oder Fliegen* (Art into Theatre—Theatre into Art) at Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin and *The World as a Stage* at Tate Modern, London, among others.

Out of these exhibitions, and the notions of theatre they brought to bear, grew the pressing need to readdress the legacies of Michael Fried and the pervasiveness of metaphors related to the stage that continue to permeate the discourses of painting, sculpture, performance, installation, photography and film and video. The aforementioned exhibitions literally put theatrical staging on display, organizing works about and around its distinct modes of address, despite the fact that such work undeniably emerged alongside widespread skepticism that has continued throughout critical discourse.

The responses to this query contained herein reflect the lack of resolve surrounding the application of such undeniable terms, tropes and metaphorical devices as theatre, theatrical, theatricality, duration, drama, staging, narrative, etc., which continue to be used to describe experiences of and relationships between art and objects, producers and consumers. The intention of this editorial position is to move beyond the purposing of the theatrical as a discursive trope through which theatre becomes a cliché and a sort of linguistic shorthand.

What this issue is not is an inquiry into a specific form or tradition. Nor is it a guidebook to all of the likely—and unlikely—places from which theatre, theatricality and its antecedents might be thought to emerge. Instead, it is meant to function as a collection of statements that interrogate the primacy of theatre as metaphor in not only contemporary visual and literary contexts but beyond. And, much like W. J. T. Mitchell, who identified the vital signs of a “pictorial turn” in contemporary culture since the mid 1990s, one might ask what the characteristics of a “theatrical turn” would be, if there were ever such a turn.

Further, one might posit whether this term needs defining at all, since theatricality has preoccupied the attention of so many for so long; its grip within—and throughout—disciplines and media is unlikely to yield anytime soon. All the while, the condemnation and celebration of its strategies, consequently, appear to be at an impasse. Rather than accept the image that the theatre offers of itself, both in vision and language, a theory of a theatrical turn would surely have to contend with the possibility that it is through this very mode that all cultural and social exchanges are mediated. And, most certainly, the artistic and political stakes at hand are worth far more than any attempt to merely repel or embrace this condition.

Anjali Gupta, Editor & Aram Moshayedi, Guest Editorial Contributor

I Come to Bury Caesar

The Image of Theatre in the Imagination of Visual Art

text by Judy Radul



Catherine Sullivan, *Political Stance (Koepke Action)*, 2003; color photograph; 20 x 24 inches; courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Consequential disciplinary boundaries are still detectable in the instances in which one art form conjures another. The symbiosis between visual art and cinema provides multiple examples, including Harun Farocki and Werner Herzog's work adapted for the museum, and artists like Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Steve McQueen, et al., whose making works that engage cinema in the gallery. Further, if one recognizes cinema as the dominant medium of our time, then theatre registers as a kind of relic. Visual artists are obviously attracted to the expressive possibilities of the theatre yet repelled by its seemingly mimetic drive and its tendency to reproduce a conventional notion of the bourgeois subject. Theatre is, therefore, often conjured in the imagination of contemporary visual art through reverse or negative identification.

Perhaps because of this negative charge, it is much more difficult to adequately articulate than to simply recognize "theatricality" as a recurring trope in the visual arts. One can readily discuss artists who evoke the theatrical to complicate authenticity (Omer Fast and Jeremy Deller being among the most interesting), to register, in addition to the obvious and symbolic meanings, a supplemental "third meaning," which "blurs the limit separating expression from disguise" and creates a "non negating mockery of expression."¹ One could also create a thesis regarding artists who find in the theatrical a model of staging, which animates social and physical space. However, for the purpose of argument, I have let myself be drawn to an empty center, organizing a series of thoughts around a category that visual artists seem to most often avoid in their evocation of the theatrical; namely, oratory.

The image of "the theatre" in the mind of the "contemporary visual artist" is clearly not a nuanced or historically correct one; rather, it consists of the theatre conceived theatrically. This is not merely a cliché or parodic imagining but a conventionalized image. Rather, I'd like to suggest that what a range of artists—including Catherine Sullivan, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Geoffrey Farmer, Alix Pearlstein, Jesper Just—are intuitively attracted to is the embarrassing quality of theatrical desire. It is a kink that contemporary art retraces its parentage to rigorous modernist self-criticality, yet this very mode of self-awareness has functioned to elevate artistic practice beyond moments of self-reflexive contraction we commonly call embarrassment. (Of course, general institutional and market success is the primary contributing factor to this well-tailored confidence, as well as its deepest source of shame.)

But to admit embarrassment is to begin to suspect the existence of unreconstructed desires—aspects of otherness at the core of a given project. On a larger, more political, but perhaps not entirely unrelated scale, French philosopher Jacques Rancière discusses the concept of the "good inhuman" in much the same way:

The Inhuman is Otherness as such. It is the part in us that we do not control.... The inhuman is the irreducible otherness, the part of the Untamable of which the human being is, as Lyotard says, the hostage or the slave. Absolute evil begins with the attempt to tame the Untamable, to deny the situation of the hostage, to dismiss our dependency on the power of the Inhuman, in order to build a world that we could master entirely.²

Visual artists often employ theatrical tropes to demonstrate the persistence of this enslaved human's painful desire to express herself—a yearning toward expression, which never fully arrives. This recurring

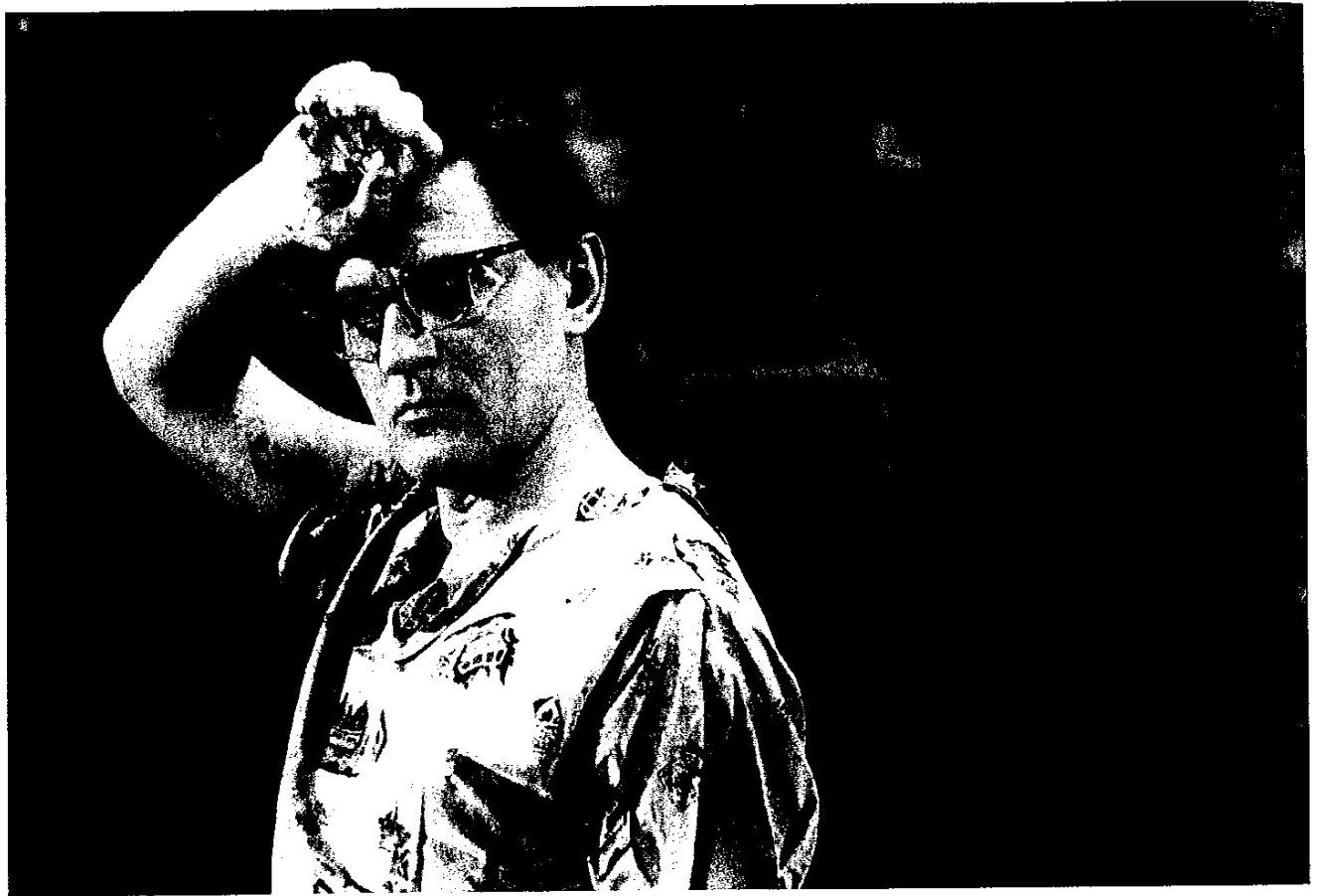
character is the everyday slave-slash-hostage, a.k.a., the actor. References to acting exercises, naturalistic or mimetic acting, conventional theatre and their continual failure to signify provide poignant articulations of the status of the actor/human/slave. (Think of Catherine Sullivan's *The Chittendens* in which a certain hysteria is acted out. Elaborately-costumed performers employ epic theatre's stiffness of gesture—in ferocious repetition—to wage a battle with expression, fueled by Helen Keller-like symptoms of disabled perception.) Contrary to the anti-acting performance art of the 1970s and nonprofessional acting of video art in the '80s, for the past decade the professional actor has become a new raw material for visual artists.

The lit stage surrounded by a dark auditorium conjures a double metaphor: the interior or non-space of the mind (as it was in German Expressionist dramas) and, perhaps more readily, a public space of social address. However, the tendency to restrict the use of the theatrical metaphor to the signification of the impossibility of full expression—of the human as slave—remains a limited, if not conservative, conception of the potential of the theatre as visual art's Other. However, it is the even more embarrassing Other—the speaking rather than the silently gesturing actor—that I want to pursue further.

A public address is performed on the mind's dark immaterial stage. Someone (is it me? Is it Bart Simpson?) stands on a curtain-framed proscenium addressing an audience. The scene is a pastiche of antiquity and Elizabethan drama, in this case Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. A lone orator in a toga—arm outstretched—addresses the crowd, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears..." In a time of blogs and RSS feeds, this model of the theatre conjures a fantasy of public speech in an era without assembly. While the stiffly outstretched arm is a little awkward, evoking both a fascist salute and the rock-and-roll air punch, what requires the utmost irony is the idea of a listening audience. Such a projection immediately evokes the likely possibility that *no one is really listening*.

Vito Acconci's early video works in which he speaks his fantasies in direct address to the viewer/video camera are paradigmatic here. Acconci recognized the medium of video as a channel by which the anonymous—even absent—gallerygoer could be instantiated by the work. Rather than a collective public, it is the individual yet abstract "you" to whom Acconci projects his desires. Acconci's video poetics are, in this sense, anti-theatrical. By contrast, pursuit of the theatrical metaphor arrives at public speech and oratory.

However, it is notable that despite the spatial and participatory engagement of the audience in works of art from minimalism to relational works, the theatrical often remains silent, unintelligible (grunts and half statements are permitted) in the imagination of visual arts. The use of theatrical oratory by fascisms, totalitarianisms and spectacular politics is of critical detriment to evoking public speech: the "theatrical mobilization of the masses" in "the mass politics of the first half of the twentieth century" fueled an anti-theatrical purpose for avant-garde theatre in the later twentieth century.³ Theatrical forms sought to break the hierarchy of the fourth wall—to incorporate audience response and to understand theatrical experience as a rehearsal for a range of participatory and antagonistic democracies. Notable here are the works of the Living Theatre of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who throughout the 1960s and '70s experimented with an Artaudian, anti-representational expressivity, collective creation and audience involvement.⁴





L & R. Catherine Sullivan, *Classic Stance (Koepke Action)*, 2003; color photographs; 20 x 24 inches each; courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

An outbreak of the anti-oratory also resides in the art world's current emphasis on "conversations." Earnestly attempting to envisage against totalitarian strains of discourse—to put into practice Rancière's "Ignorant Schoolmaster" and to flatten a disfiguringly striated art world—the art of conversation, as if a rusted relic, is being restored in numerous forums. These include *unitednationsplaza* and related *Night School* projects, as well as The New York Conversations recently hosted by *A Prior* magazine with Nico Dockx, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Anton Vidokle. In Vancouver, there are the activities of The Colour School and related experiments. Artists including Tino Sehgal and art historian Grant Kester have made conversation the focus of powerful works.

Perhaps if the art of conversation is being revived, the reinvention of the art of oration can't be far behind. In this instance, we might consider the fevered exhortations of Jonathan Meese and John Bock. And, although Shakespearean rather than Wagnerian-manic in tone, unhinged speech also features in James Coleman's film installation, *Retake with Evidence* (2007), showcased at *Documenta 12*. This monologue occasionally references an audience that the protagonist can't locate, "Why are we here, what is the meaning of this gathering?" Unable to anchor his speech through reception the protagonist, played by Harvey Keitel, remains lost (as lost as a major Hollywood star can be) and wanders, disengaged, through theatricalized antiquity, speaking to himself as if to a crowd. This Hamlet-like trope—oratory turned inward—is, of course, a conventional theatrical signifier for madness.

However, an emphasis on oratory as oppressive is underpinned by a conventional understanding of the causality of the compulsion of speech. The moment of speech may, conversely, be considered as one in which we respond to a (silent) call. If so, the reluctance to entangle oneself in public speech for fear of speaking for others whose voice you repress with your own may be reconceptualized in diametric (but no less fraught) ways. For cultural critic and philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the call that compels speech is from a "big Other," an unheard, internalized cultural power to whom we feel continuously responsible to answer:

...it is as if when we're talking, whatever we say is an answer to a primordial address by the Other—we're always already addressed, but this address is blank, it cannot be pinpointed to a specific agent, but is a kind of empty a priori, the formal "condition of possibility" of our speaking.⁵

For other scholars such as Amit Pinchevski—working through Levinas—it is an ethical responsibility to which speech, which is "free" only at the cost of suppressing its status as always already a response to a call from the Other, responds.⁶

Whether compelled by a big Other or an ethical Other, there is the potential to reorient the image of the public speaker, not as the causal agent—the one whose rigidly outstretched arm materializes a vocal erection—but as one who rides within a slipstream of speech. Michel Foucault describes this desire in the opening of his 1970 lecture "The Discourse on Language":

At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense,

to beckon me. There would have been no beginnings; instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance.

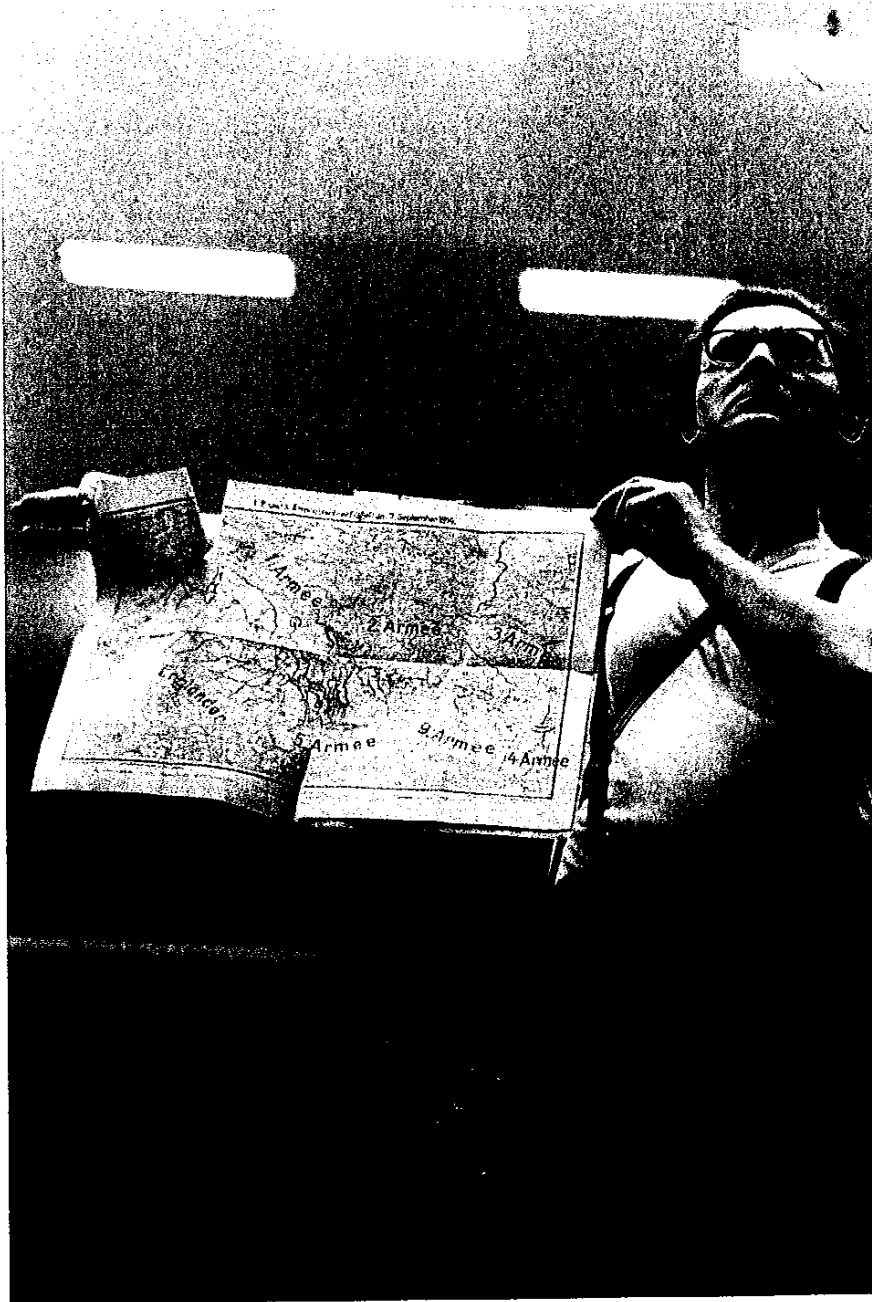
Occasionally we do hear public exhortations. And, as with all speech acts, it is voice through which these reiterations become present and therefore also distanced (from origins in writing and, as Jean-Luc Nancy claims, contra to Derrida, that the voice also distances the self):

The voice is not a thing, it is the means by which something—some-one—takes distance from the self and lets that distance resonate. Voice does not only come out of an opening, it is itself open and opens on itself.⁷

The ventriloquism in Andrea Fraser's *Official Welcome* (2001) embodies this dialectic of presence and distance through oratory, bringing the "private" voice to public speech—one aspect of the work of feminism. As if to compensate for her pointed collage of aura-enforcing rhetoric, Fraser removes her clothing while speaking through a series of characters—hyperbolic museum directors, emotional and aggressive artists. This stripping is purposely futile. Like Fraser's well-timed tears, it leans heavily on performance-art cliché. It functions as a real yet parodic attempt to unveil the body as the ground of speech: to open the opening, to keep the ventriloquized address located neither in speech—nor the body—but in the distance between.

And, it is not only Fraser but the listening audience who are stand-ins. As in so many speeches to "the assembled crowd," the audience is asked to play a generality: it is an audience from another museum opening to whom these words are really directed. Those assembled are, like Fraser, dislodged from their own presence. We may be incriminated as coconspirators, but there is a deep ambivalence in this mode of address. The question of who is speaking and who is being spoken to—of how the utterance of a "welcome" could possibly be "official"—is at issue in Fraser's work. What interests me is the role that playing at oratory plays in keeping open modes of listening and saying while holding "the said" at bay.

1. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 48, 49.
2. Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:2–3 (2004), 308.
3. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.
4. Theatre's relation to the acting out of social and political power structures is detailed in Jacques Rivette's 1970 twelve-and-a-half-hour film *Out 1: Noli me tangere*. The story weaves between the work of two theatre companies (showing hours of acting and encounter exercises) each producing Aeschylus plays—one under the auspices of a paternalistic director and the other exploring group creation.
5. Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You with My Eyes, or, The Invisible Master," *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects: Sic 1*, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 91.
6. Amit Pinchevski, "Freedom from Speech (Or the Silent Demand)," *Diacritics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 2001).
7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, translated by Brian Holmes (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 240.



Catherine Sullivan, *Political Stance (Koepke Action)*, 2003; color photograph;
24 x 20 inches; courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York