2nd Annual Festival of Poets Theatre
Reflections on the Incomplete Project of Poets Theater

Carla Harryman


I think of Poets Theater of the late 70s and early 80s in San Francisco as representing the heyday of poetic writing. It is the climate of an emergent language-centered poetics, a practice of radical experiment that resulted in new theater and live performance art and a new generation of visual artists who worked with performance elements in an array of public and non-public settings, including improvised behavior in art spaces and public presentation. The emphasis on process, on idea not as a theory to be proved, the interest in making mental processes a feature of the work, the transformation of the theater, performance art, and conceptualism intermingle in poets’ performance activities and theatrical statement.

Conceptualism primarily untrained performers directed by Eileen Corder and Nick Robinson called the San Francisco Bay Area Poets Theater that performed conceptualizing and conceptualizing. Here are two examples, one by Robert Smithson called Asphal Rundown and another by Uthco called Mr. Sister. One is a documentation of a performance event, the other is a documentation of itself.

In Smithson’s Asphal Rundown (1968), a drag queen named asphalt drives a drag show—a theater of沥青 and dust, the materials of documentation. The performance event is documented on film, and the documentation is the performance. It is a performance of the performance, which has moulded us.

In Uthco’s Mr. Sister (1968), an event is documented on film and then the film is performed as a performance, which has moulded us.

In Uthco’s performance project untitled (1968), a drag queen named asphalt drives a drag show—a theater of沥青 and dust, the materials of documentation. The performance event is documented on film, and the documentation is the performance. It is a performance of the performance, which has moulded us.

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I do not claim that everything we do is entirely new. We are bound, consciously or unconsciously, to be influenced by the traditions, science and art, even by the superstitions and presentiments peculiar to the civilization which has moulded us.
I am writing short pieces aimed at rehearsal situations, and the above bits are examples of this. Unlike my earlier writings for performance, these exercises don't require visualizing the text even as speaking the text. I would like those who use these exercises to become comfortable with the way of thinking described here—a way of thinking about performance. It will also serve as aspects of my foundational language. The bringing into proximity of abstraction, representation, concept, and commitment is an essential component to the production of a performance. In work that is not only a performance but a performance in which the performance is not, a writer might orient herself around words that evoke objects or tableaux. But my hypothesis is that this way of thinking can make contact with the idea that the ensemble and rehearsal make contact with a writer's work. I want to point out here a consequential feature of my writing: Live performance and writing exist in proximity for me, but they are not the same thing. I am interested in the works and actions of ensemble and rehearsal situations.

Returning to my earlier conjectures about performance—how the process would ring familiar bells for my hypothesis—and performance might be nearest, directly or indirectly, already existing methods and work. The first exercise, the ensemble, could refer through repetition and citation to earlier performances, and / or参照前作，以及对前作的强调和致意。通过重复和引用，甚至在一些例子中，已经存在的方法和工作。
The Living Theater's production of William Carlos Williams' Many Loves opened January 13, 1959 and ran in repertory along with Luigi Pirandello's Tonight We Improvise. Artistic Director Julian Beck writes that these works' play-within-a-play devices "made a direct attempt at involving the audience... To aid the audience to become once more what it was destined to be when the first dramas formed themselves on the threshing floor: a congregation led by priests, a choral ecstasy of reading and response... Not once, but often, people requested their money back at the box office because they had not come to see a bunch of people rehearsing; they wanted to see a show, the finished product." On the left is a young Martin Sheen.

Ladies' Voices, by Gertrude Stein, opened August 15, 1951, and was part of the LivingTheater's debut program when in company at the Cherry Lane Theater. Beck said, "Our initial commitment was with form. That was why the first play we did was by Gertrude Stein. The work of Stein was attractive to us because it never ceased being part of the revolution of the word." On the right is Director and Playwright Judith Malina. Gordon Rogoff, oncetheater critic at the Village Voice, said of Malina, "Judith was a director with a difference -- tempting actors into a performance on behalf of the non-violent revolution she was always staging regardless of the material, the inspirations, the ideas, and the text. Yes, the text has to be remembered because it is where she and Julian began all their work: Gertrude Stein, poets..."

Selections from Cosmological Plants

Michael Pisaro

Selections from Cosmological Plants

The piece is in two acts with a pause and set change between them. The performers also change names in between the two acts.

Performer 1:
Triangulum (Act I) = Andromeda 1 (Act II)
Performer 2:
Cassiopeia (Act I) – Andromeda 2 (Act II)

Each act is organized into a series of events, timed to coordinate with the backing track. The track itself will help control the durations of the events (when along with timers placed meditatively in the space to help guide the performers).

Set Objects and their locations on the grid:

Act I:
(7b) Desk, chair, lamp, pencil paper
(6h) A plant sprayer, filled with water and a large sheet of paper (at 1 square meter), laid on the floor.
(9h) A small cactus placed on the floor and a small speaker next to it.
(8k) A bell suspended from some kind of percussion stand.
(7n) Another bell (of a different sound and size) suspended from a percussion stand.
(9t) A row of three suspended at head level. A vessel with which to water these plants (placed below)

Act II:
(7b) Desk, chair, lamp, pencil paper (same as in Act I)
(6h) A large sheet of tin foil (at least 1 square meter), laid on the floor. A half-pound of white beans in a container, and a half-pound of millet in a container.
(14l) An electric keyboard on a stand or a guitar in its case (at a slight angle)
(13m) Chair (at a slight angle that allows keyboard or guitar to be played.
(1n) A bed of some kind with a large white sheet over it.
(10p) A floor tom or bass drum with a soft beater
(9t) Plants as in act one. Each plant has a different colored spotlight on it: Green, Blue, Red respectively.

Act 1 (eight minutes)

Event 1 (0:00—1:00)

Backing track starts with high sounds. No movement.

Event 2 (1:00-3:00) (simultaneous actions)

Triangulum:
A large sheet of tin foil (at least 1 square meter), laid on the floor. A half-pound of white beans in a container, and a half-pound of millet in a container.

Event 3 (3:00-5:00)

An electric keyboard on a stand or a guitar in its case (at a slight angle)

Event 4 (5:00-7:00)

A floor tom or bass drum with a soft beater

Event 5 (7:00-9:00)

Plants as in act one. Each plant has a different colored spotlight on it: Green, Blue, Red respectively.

Act I (eight minutes)

Scenic lighting.
Event 1 (0:00—1:00)

Back light starts with light sounds. No movement.

Event 2 (1:00-3:00) (simultaneous actions)

Flashlight
My eyes are polished smooth by sight, they clot like crystals in storm glass, like my sister brewing beakers of toxin. If we had seen what had been done, what the helicopter pilot did in our name, what the special ops team did in our name, what they did with their hands in our name. If we had seen with our own smooth eyes.

Mark the diacritical, my lovely: we’re all wearing our knee-high boots, every last one of us, we live in a booted nation. A nation girded and gunning.

This moment, this is precisely all, watching takes work, sight takes hours, takes my eyeglasses, every last one of them, as if they were yours. You can see there’s a sigh in our sight. What if it were my sister? What if it were, what. The catchword if you can, a sure eye keeps the engine running.

What we saw ground into our eyes with the photos, with the newspaper reports, carved out our ears with the radio stories. What would I say, what can I say if, it were my sister, my own? With my own beakers of toxin, my own boots, my own hands in my own name?
Poets theater is a genre of porous borders, one that emerges about the same time, and involving many of the same artists, as performance art, performance poetry (“spoken word”), conceptual and “intermedia” art. But poets have long been playwrights, either primarily (Sappho, Shakespeare) or as a platform for postmodern literary experimentation (the operas and page plays of Gertrude Stein, for example). If poetry can most specifically be called, in the words of David Antin, “the language art;” the collusion of linguistic media and dance, performance, music, and the visual/plastic arts might also fall under the purview of poets as a theater of experiment that may or may not have to do with the genre “drama” as it is traditionally and persistently defined (think of Simone Forti’s collaborations with Charlemagne Palestine or Jackson Mac Low, or Adam Pendleton’s “Black Dada” performances generated in tandem to his privately circulating anthology and publicly exhibited paintings of the same name). Although recognized by two anthologies—Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Coles’s Poets at Play and Kevin Killian and David Brazil’s Kennng Anthology of Poets Theater—it wasn’t since Michael Benedikt’s Theatre Experiment in 1967 that the wider scope of pertinent work to fall under this rubric was fully acknowledged. If poets theater is a form of sociability, page play, agitprop, or post-dramatic theatre, fully distinct disciplinary boundaries have internally divided it as a field, and dispersed our knowledge and the influence of its practitioners.

But, a tentative taxonomy can be attempted. There are several subgenres of poets theater that have emerged in recent years, all with links to the longer history of the form. Though that history is much longer (ancient, in fact), by the first years of the 21st century, three approaches were visible, and each is represented in this year’s programming. On one hand, you have an operatic approach, taken by Carla Harryman. Harryman’s poets theater work has always involved collaboration, improvisation, and a process-oriented production approach. She deliberately pairs theater people with poets, both of these with visual artists (on set work), and all with musicians who sometimes burst into the scene, rather than merely composing for it. And then there is the coterie approach, which has been a local tradition in San Francisco poets theater for years, under the auspices of Kevin Killian’s work with Small Press Traffic’s “Poets Theater Jamboree,” an annual festival. Here the script is held in hand, rehearsal is practically avoided, and the writing is foregrounded in hilarious and often unique ways. Much has been written about the willful amateurishness of this approach, which ought to remind us that the root of “amateur” is the root of “amity,” friendship, love, and community. And third, there is a neo-benshi approach that more and more folds in visual art, page play, agitprop, or post-dramatic theatre, fully distinct disciplinary boundaries have internally divided it as a field, and dispersed our knowledge and the influence of its practitioners.

The Second Annual Festival of Poets Theater aims to investigate (and explode) these categories with performances, screenings and readings over four nights, plus an afternoon of talks on the genre and salient examples of it. The first iteration of the festival, in late 2015, featured the work of three generations of writers and artists, including screenings of work by El-eanor Antin and the infamous production of Kathy Acker’s Birth of the Poet in 1985. Avery Youngreset Amir Barak’s 1968 play “Home on the Range” in reference to Blacklivesmatter. Heidi Bean, John Beer, and Carla Harryman gave talks on poets theater. And Patrick Durgin explored contemporary debates in performance reenactment while paying homage to Scott Burton and Judith Malina. Others worked with reference to Isadora Duncan and Seneca. The festival’s offerings ranged from operatic to his privately circulating anthology and publicly exhibited paintings of the same name). Although recognized by two anthologies—Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Coles’s Poets at Play and Kevin Killian and David Brazil’s Kennng Anthology of Poets Theater—it wasn’t since Michael Benedikt’s Theatre Experiment in 1967 that the wider scope of pertinent work to fall under this rubric was fully acknowledged. If poets theater is a form of sociability, page play, agitprop, or post-dramatic theatre, fully distinct disciplinary boundaries have internally divided it as a field, and dispersed our knowledge and the influence of its practitioners.

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