

UC Irvine

2016 Conference Proceedings

Title

Ghosting the Radical in the New Gilded Age: Immersive Theatre in Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cc0g10n>

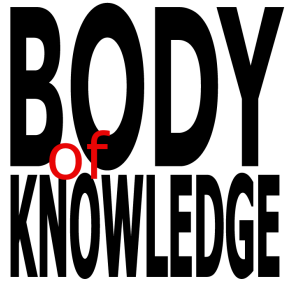
Author

Zimmerman, Guy

Publication Date

2018-01-08

Peer reviewed



Ghosting the Radical in the New Gilded Age: Immersive Theatre in Los Angeles

Proceedings of A Body of Knowledge - Embodied Cognition and the Arts conference
CTSA UCI 8-10 Dec 2016

Guy Zimmerman

Ghosting the Radical in the New Gilded Age:

Immersive Theatre in Los Angeles

By

Guy Zimmerman

1. The Processual City: LA as Performance

Comparisons between cities and organisms have become commonplace. If such comparisons seem obscure, or the concept of the processual city overly abstract, travel South aboard Amtrak's double-decker Surfliner and watch Los Angeles shamelessly flaunt its own processual aspect in a lurid, sexy display of transversal vitality. Passing through a vast earthworks assemblage, as if the work of land artist Robert Smithson had been genetically spliced with that of Eli Broad, the passenger bears witness to the daily emergence of Los Angeles, the city drawing itself up out of the urban wasteland along the LA River, the cement channels blending seamlessly into a snaking patchwork of rail yards and endless freight depots crammed with boxcar containers fresh from the ports of Shanghai and Nanjing, each one packed with consumer goods en route to Target, Home Depot and Costco outlets across the LA Basin, and miles of tanker cars full of oil waiting to be assigned their destinations. The vast landscape of lots and enormous depots abruptly transitions, South of Anaheim, into an extended series of residential subdivisions and then, further South in Irvine, into the pastoral substrata of subdivided ranchland. Assembling itself by means of vast metabolic processes drawing on metal and stone and fuel and water and bio mass, LA pulls together each day to perform a new iteration of itself as a gargantuan work of art, pathetic and depraved and exalted all at once.

2. *Site-specific Practice in L.A.*

I have a long investment in site specific theatre in Los Angeles, and a deep belief in its value as a transformative and liberative collective practice. In this mode I have been staging site specific work in a long list of the city's heterotopic urban spaces—airport parking lots, car dealerships, cold storage facilities, an abandoned zoo, a busy mall, the cement channel of the LA river, suburban backyards and empty swimming pools—defamiliarizing and re-encoding the quotidian spaces of late phase capitalism's emblematic city. This paper seeks to assess this more-familiar site-based aesthetic practice in the context of the recent vogue in Punchdrunk-esque "immersive" productions in N.Y., London and elsewhere to see if this new trend extends and refines the sited theatre tradition or expresses, as some have maintained, a quite different effort to make the urban site into a form of themed, neoliberal entertainment. I use the delayed arrival of immersive theatre in Los Angeles to address this question, and test the idea that this quintessential neoliberal (i.e. free-market) city itself has from the beginning expressed a kind of immersive performance, such that Punchdrunk-style theatre is redundant in LA. Analyzing the 2014 immersive production *The Day Shall Declare It* (the city's first) I locate in this new mode of performance a "covert collectivism" that indeed rebels against the reductive imperatives of neoliberal subjectivity.

Among my presuppositions is the idea that neoliberalism is a cultural paradigm that rose to dominance through what Wendy Brown has called a "stealth revolution" that began in the mid-1960s and that has now commandeered most of our civic institutions, the academy very much included. Another presupposition is that theatre lies across that open, unencoded space where the individual human organism connects to the collective. Theatre resides, in other words, at the source of culture and politics, ethics and power, and in its basic dynamics draws upon the

“state of exception” by which sovereignty stakes its legitimacy. As Donald Trump reminded us when he recently took *Hamilton* to task on Twitter—this was, remarkably, perhaps his first official act as president elect—the theatricality tyrants have always relied on makes theatre artists, by definition, a natural enemy. This paper is, finally, part of a larger project to show how the history of theatrical form in the West can usefully be viewed through an enactivist lens all the way back to Greek tragedy, and that is no doubt the case also for other traditions of theatre making.

3. A Question Regarding Immersive Theatre in L.A.

In the 1960s and 70s the Arts District east of downtown Los Angeles provided the Live Art movement with an abundance of urban sites ripe for radical situationist re-encodings. Here, the innovations of Alan Kaprow’s happenings were fleshed out by visual and performance artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Mike Kelley, Johanna Went, and Paul McCarthy. As they were abandoned by manufacturers seeking cheaper labor elsewhere, the warehouses and industrial lofts of this area between Little Tokyo and the LA River were occupied by young iconoclasts streaming out of the region’s many first-tier art schools (CalArts, Otis, ArtCenter and UCLA). The abstraction of the city’s open, low-density, master-plan mode of development elicited from these artists the situated and the embodied. The industrial architecture of the Arts District, in particular, invited, and also challenged, body-centered expressivity. The monumental vacancy of the Arts District’s iconic flood-control infrastructure—the cement channel of the LA river, the 1st, 4th and 7th Street bridges leading to East LA, the low-lying, earthquake-proof warehouses and deep-freeze storage facilities—inspired protest and provoked insurrection, such as Kim Jones’s famous *Mudman*, a shamanic creature that first emerged from the LA River in 1976 to walk the

length of Wilshire Boulevard. This young talent engaged with the most intriguing material at hand—the urban milieu of LA itself.

Given this rich history of site-specific experimentation, the somewhat delayed arrival, in 2014, of immersive theatre in LA—Wilderness Stage Company's *The Day Shall Declare It* (or *The Day*)—poses an intriguing cultural puzzle. For almost a decade immersive theatre has been the hot ticket in New York and London—what took LA so long to embrace the immersive form? Is it simply LA living up to its largely undeserved reputation for cultural backwardness? Or is it perhaps the two main audience-killers Angelino theatre artists often inveigh against: the city's relatively low population density, together with the poverty of its public transportation system? Weighing such factors is challenging too because of how the critical assessment of immersive theatre remains itself oddly divided. Some critics (Adam Alston and Keren Zaiontz) have connected the movement to narcissistic spectatorship and the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism. Others (Erick Neher) have taken a more benign view of this new, situated aesthetic, celebrating the immersive mode as a natural extension of Malina and Beck's avant-garde experiments with The Living Theatre in the 1960s, a lineage that resonates strongly with Live Art. Intriguingly, this critical divergence replicates the discourse around the political implications of postmodernism—Fredric Jameson decrying kitsch resignation where Baudrillard applauds radical displacement—a discourse also conspicuously linked to Los Angeles, and to assessments of Los Angeles as a bright or a dark omen for our collective future.

The two warehouse spaces in which Wilderness has mounted *The Day* (first in 2014 and then in a 2016 revival) are both located near the Western foot of the 7th Street Bridge, a conduit to the vast Latino city of East Los Angeles. At the Southern edge of the Arts District, this intersection marks ground zero of the rapidly gentrifying loft region, but the businesses being

replaced by urban pioneers today are not manufacturing and distribution centers—those disappeared in the 1980s and 90s—but rather businesses centered around renting locations to film, television and advertising companies. These secondary urban sites have themselves long been re-purposed by artists and performers for alternate and even subversive agendas. The Wilderness warehouse, for example, is a short block away from an infamous 4-story “speakeasy” called Bedlam (on 6th Street), where, for almost a decade (2003—2011), a group of painters and fabricators regularly convened late night arts events around weekly nude drawing classes held in a ground floor warehouse space so cavernous 16-wheelers could park in it with room to spare. Among the striking features of Bedlam were the upstairs lofts, each one decorated and dressed in the style of the last ad or TV or film production that had taped a spot, a scene, or an episode there. Performing theatre in these settings invoked a dizzying, fractal quality—performative illusion in Los Angeles is always nested within the more general performative illusion of the city itself. The site on which *The Day* is enacted is thus triply ghosted, first by its industrial origin, then by the Live Art meta-critique that is now over forty years old, and, finally, by a performative dimension of the city in which it unfolds.

If nothing else, the looping, fractal quality cited above suggests that the encounter between *The Day Shall Declare It* and the city of Los Angeles is a trans-contextual interface worth attending to. Does the immersive form, I ask, extend the activist critiques of the Live Art past into a new political and subjective modality, or, instead, betray those same radical antecedents by propagating free-market, neoliberal values?

The Day Shall Declare It was developed and co-directed by Annie Saunders and Immersive Theatre veteran choreographer Sophie Bortolussi¹. In 2015, Saunders also performs in the piece, along with Anthony Nikolchev and Chris Polick. Texts adapted from the work of

Tennessee Williams and Studs Terkel provide a kind of spoken-word accompaniment for the evening's three tightly coiled dance pieces. By the standards of *Sleep No More* and other immersive theatre productions, *The Day* is an anomaly—with its cast of three it is much smaller than the typical Immersive Theatre production. The space of *The Day* is small too—the warehouse space has only a single story. But because the piece fully embodies the defining elements of the genre—a mobile audience roaming at will through theatrical spaces along with the performers—the small scale of *The Day* actually recommends it as a model by which to gauge the geographical implications of the immersive form. In this paper I am, again, concerned not with analyzing the artistic merit of the production, but rather with how the genre relates to the psychology of cultural power in the neoliberal era. My focus is drawn to how the audience responds to the event.

Critics have pointed to the competitive nature of the individual's agency in the immersive event as a sign of its alignment with the market-driven values of neoliberal ideology. As mentioned above, immersive theater replaces the generic proscenium audience experience with a free-roaming, agential and individuated audience. If one hundred people attend an immersive theatre performance, it might be argued, there is not just *one* audience, but rather a hundred separate audiences, each actively engaged in the effort to maximize their enjoyment. While each member of the audience remains still separate from the performance, the degree of separation varies depending on luck and timing and the choices made by the individual. While this competitive agenda is undeniably an aspect of the form, I sense the issue is considerably more complex and includes tendencies pressing very much in the opposite direction.

What I find most striking about my experience of *The Day* is present from the very beginning in an expression of wonder I notice on the faces of the theatre goers waiting with me

at the bar at the beginning of the evening. Throughout the performances I'm struck again and again by how this elation—a kind of covert joy—ramps up whenever the performers reach out to shift the audience across the invisible boundary of the performative. This anxious, eager delight, I come to believe, is rooted in the differential charge of theatrical space itself—how it differs in fundamental ways from the shared and more fully encoded social space in which it is nested, drawing out of the individual audience member an experience of greater openness and the free play of pure capacities and potentials. The actual content of *The Day* is thus largely irrelevant to its effect—consistent with McLuhan, the radical potentiality of the theatrical medium itself is the point here, specifically how it counter-acts the reductive ethos pervading our cultural milieu. Contact with the open theatre space has such a strong impact, in other words, precisely because of the collapsive imperatives that are central to the neoliberal cultural regime.

As theorists from Guy Debord to Jean-Joseph Goux have pointed out, the brand of capitalism that arrived in the late 1960s and that has come to be known as neoliberalism, is rooted in affective rather than cognitive entrainment—what Isabelle Stengers refers to as “capitalist sorcery.” What most alarmed Debord is how neoliberal capital dropped any appeal to transcendent reason—i.e. the progress of civilization—and embraced instead the power of immanent desire, previously the domain of the artist and the performer. Goux views this immanent dimension of neoliberal capital to be a commandeering of the avant-garde project, in which business seize the prerogatives of Dionysus, turning the vehicle of innovative desire creation to its own purposes². Rather than infusing the common sense values of everyday life with the emergent energies of artistic production, neoliberal capital deploys the reductive values of business accounting to capture that source of life-affirming affect. In this new form of subjectivity—what Wendy Brown calls *entrepreneurial subjectivity*—“performance” is linked to

market-place metrics. Entombing the individual within his or her competitive aggressivity, neoliberalism quickly pathologizes or even punishes any connective or communitarian impulse. Doreen Massey captures the essence of this ethos in her phrase “there is only one story,” and that story involves the imperatives of entrepreneurial subjectivity, an isolated, competitive and performative mode of engaging with the social world as if one were a business rather than a biological being. Immersive theater both invokes this competitive subject and also rebels against its dominance, colliding it against the performative sublime of theatrical space itself.

A larval form of counter-sorcery, immersive theatre here exists to invoke the social, to drop a ladder into the abyss of neoliberal subjectivity and create a temporary reprieve. The theatrical event takes place within a magic circle across which the spell of capital is temporarily neutralized, held in abeyance. In *The Day*, the situationist edge of the Live Art movement has been introjected across the boundary separating the inside of theatre from the outside of its neoliberal urban milieu. Entrepreneurialism obviously has zero value in the anti-market, monopolistic environment neoliberalism has actually delivered. The fantasy of the entrepreneurial subject is designed to pacify those being stripped of their power and privilege by a tiny monopolistic elite. On the other hand, the release of theatrical indeterminacy into the public arena is potentially a radical act drawing all social relations under a sign of *aporia*. In order to counter the sorcery of neoliberal capitalism, the activist impulse of Live Art has been re-configured into an affective, enactivist mode. The politics of situated immersion and site-specificity thus illuminates the dominant trans-strategies of neoliberalism itself, in which the language of choice and empowerment are deployed to further an anti-market, anti-egalitarian agenda.

5. *The Immersive City*

What does the future hold for immersive theater in Los Angeles? I don't sense a strong match, but for interesting reasons. Immersive theatre has found no easy home in LA, we come to see, because LA itself can be considered a vast immersive enactment, its citizenry already engaged in the challenging performance demanded of the entrepreneurial subject—the urgent tasks of success, of self-branding and self-marketing, and of living daily life under the constant shadow of debt. While the entrepreneurial subjectivity of neoliberalism defines the urban milieu of New York and London where immersive theatre thrives, in Los Angeles the city itself provides not only an “already immersed experience of social and political life” but also an open plan urban design ideally suited to the entrepreneurial subject. Whereas in New York or London that subject needs to resolve an alienation attendant on the form of neoliberal subjectivity, in LA the city itself accommodates and dissipates that source of social and psychological tension. The city of Los Angeles was, in fact, constructed precisely in order to help the entrepreneurial subject enjoy a false sense of completion and enjoyment. Immersive theatre in NY and London can thus be seen as a mechanism for retrofitting the neoliberal subject to the early 20th-century urban plans of London and New York. Hence, while I agree with James Ball that “our always already immersed experience of social and political life leads audiences to immersive theatre in an effort to alienate their experience of the everyday,” I hold that this is *less* true for the population of Los Angeles, and that this difference is illuminating about the ways in which open plan urban designs are geared toward accommodating neoliberalism. Conversely, immersive theatre may then be viewed as, at least in part, a social mechanism designed to reconcile neoliberal subjects with earlier modes of urban planning.

The delayed arrival of immersive production in Los Angeles, I suggest, is due to the ways in which a performative dimension was actually baked into the city from its origins in late 19th century Gilded Age real estate dealings. Conjured out of barren ranchland in the span of a single human life, Los Angeles provided an open stage—a theatrical space of pure capacity—on which the modern was invited to perform, an urban landscape infused with the subjunctive, the iterative and the post-human. Los Angeles created itself, it can in fact be argued, as a *longue duree*, immersive theatrical event, where the huddled masses could move to create new lives, new identities, new and improved modes of being modern and American. When, toward the close of the 1960s, the kitschy prefab veneer of this Disneyfied utopia began to showcase the differential effects of decay, the So-Cal suburban paradise quickly deviated from its own norm toward racial disruption, riot and fire. Then, with the rise of Reagan in the 1980s, Los Angeles showcased a newly renovated, postmodern form of capitalism centered around the visionary entrepreneur, a risk-taking apostle of the new, providing the population with an ever-expanding vista of new consumer choices, new empowerments, new avenues for productive self-expression, leading inexorably instead to the yawning racial and economic disparities of our new Gilded Age. An analysis of immersive theater thus winds up revealing both how the entrepreneurial subjectivity of neoliberalism isolates the individual, and how resistance to this *status quo* is arising in unexpected ways.

Works Cited

Alston, Adam. "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility In Immersive Theatre." *Performance Research*, 18:2 : pp.128-138, 2013

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2015.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Brooklyn: Verso, 1990.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. Detroit: Black & Red, 2010. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*.

Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Gilder, George F. *Wealth and Poverty*. New York: Regnery, 1981.

Goux, Jean-Joseph. *The Coiners of Language*. Trans. Jennifer Gage. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

-- "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism." *Yale French Studies*, No. 78. 1990. 206-224.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 1988. : 575-599.

Harries, Martin. "Regarding the Pain of Rats: Kim Jones's Rat Piece." *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 51, N 1, Spring 2007. pp. 160-165

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005. Print.

Knowles, Ric. "Editorial Comment: Spectatorship." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 66, N. 3, 2014

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005.

McWilliams, Carrie. *Southern California: An Island on the Land*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1946.

Neher, Erick. "The New Immersive Theatre." *The Hudson Review*, Spring 2016.

Patton, Paul. "Foucault's Subject of Power." *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy*. Ed. Jeremy Moss. London: Sage Publications. 1998. Print.

Phelan, Peggy. *Live Art in LA*. New York: Routledge. 2012. Print.

Pignarre, Phillip and Isabelle Stengers. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. Trans.

Andrew Goffey. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2011. Print.

Schulman, Sara. *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. Berkeley:

University of California Press, 2012. Print.

Werry, Margaret and Bryan Schmidt. "Immersion and the Spectator." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 66,

N. 3, 2014

Zaiontz, Keren. "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance."

Theatre Journal, Vol. 66, N. 3, 2014

¹ Bortolussi played Lady Macbeth in the Boston and New York version of Punchdrunk's landmark *Sleep No More*.

² Jean-Joseph Goux, "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism" *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, 206-224 (1990.) Goux points especially to Reagan's favorite author, George Gilders.