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radical gestures: feminism and performance art in North America

Jayne Wark; McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston and London, Ithaca, 2006, 288 pp, ISBN 978-0-7735-3066-9, £18.99.

As stated in her introduction, Jayne Wark's central aim in *Radical Gestures* is to demonstrate how 'feminist performance played a decisive role in negotiating a new relationship between art and politics' (p. 3). The grounds for such argument are clearly made in her first two chapters, 'Art Politics and Feminism in the 1960s' and 'The Origins of Feminist Art'. Here, Wark charts how second-wave feminism's phenomenological inflection, epitomized by the rallying call of 'the personal is political', and early recognition of the subversive potential of performance as a site for the enactment of agency, effectively re-politicized what had been an almost exclusively male avant-garde art world, dominated by a neo-modernist aesthetics of 'autonomy' and 'critical detachment'. In Chapter 3: 'Cultural feminism: essence and difference', Wark acknowledges the validity of the now familiar critiques levelled at 'body-based' performance art in the 1970s, with its prevalent vaginal iconology and 'celebration' of women's spiritual affinity with nature. She cautions, however, against the frequent generalization of feminist critical practice in the 1970s as predominately 'essentialist', arguing that the critical groundwork for the anti-essentialist/constructivist stance associated with the postmodern tenor of the 1980s was already being laid in the preceding decade by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper and Martha Rosler. Here, Wark picks up on an issue sign-posted in her introduction – that much recent feminist criticism of performance art has 'tended to prioritize work centred on the actions or images of the body' (p. 7), to the neglect of what she asserts is the equally significant use of language-based forms such as autobiography, narrative and parody, and the transformational potential of role-playing. Such performative strategies form the focus of her fourth and fifth chapters, before she returns to develop key issues raised by work foregrounding the body and sexuality in her sixth and final chapter, 'Embodiment and Representation'.

The reciprocal relationship of feminist practice and theory is strongly conveyed throughout Wark's writing. Granted, the text is densely packed and important theoretical nuances are often relegated to the extensive endnotes in order to cram what is a far-reaching survey of thirty plus years of feminist critical practice into a meagre 200 pages. Wark's reference to Simone De Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler as seminal theorists and a wealth of

critical voices, including Sue Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, Amelia Jones and Peggy Phelan, may well – as is appropriate in any survey – cover familiar terrain for those well-versed in the field, but rehearsal has its uses for both older and newer recruits to the ensemble. For example, Wark's concise disentanglement (pp. 72–82) of what Case (1990: 7) has described as the 'essentialist/post-structuralist strife and stall' in feminist thought in the late 1980s, and her endorsement of calls for a 'strategic essentialism' and coalitional feminist politics in order to withstand the reactionary backlash threatening the hard-won rights of women, people of colour, lesbians and gays, remains a vitally important argument that merits repeating, especially for the current generation of emergent academics and artists born into what some phallogocentrics would claim is a post-feminist era.

I similarly applaud Wark's recuperation in Chapters 4–6 of the many well- and lesser-known (predominately American) feminist performance artists active in the 1970s and what for me was an introduction to the (almost exclusively Canadian) artists she cites from the 1980s and 1990s as demonstrating the continuity of feminist concerns into the new millennium. However, while I appreciate it is impossible to reference every North American-based feminist performance artist active over the time period studied, there are notable omissions attendant on this arbitrary geographical-temporal divide. The various postmodern, Queer and post-colonial inflections of, for example, Karen Finley, Coco Fusco and Annie Sprinkle, merit at least brief discussion, especially as these artists have, along with many others such as Lois Weaver of Split Britches' fame, maintained the strong link between arts activism and pedagogy, discussed by Wark in relation to Judy Chicago and the Womanhouse project (pp. 48–57). It is also noteworthy that while many of the artists discussed do clearly engage with what Wark (p. 76), adopting Kimberlè Crenshaw Williams' terminology, has termed the 'intersectionality' of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class, the social category of disability is not addressed highlighting by default the fact that differently abled artists remain an under-represented minority in the contemporary arts scene in general. Such issues of embodiment and representation are core to any feminist praxis and here too I admit that I find Wark's thematic organization of material and prioritization of 'language' over 'body-based' performance art in the second half of the book problematic, as all of the artists selected for discussion are effectively forwarding the French feminist agenda of 'writing the body as text'.

That said, Wark's focus on performances dealing with domestic and familial issues (pp. 99–123) and reiteration of bell hooks' and Martha Rosler's assertion that 'the forces of domination and oppression as played out in the private sphere are inseparable from our more conventional understanding of their impact in the public sphere' (p.115) remains crucially relevant as artists such as Gillian Collyer and Margarethe Dragu continue to expose the oppressive machinations of the

still erect, twin megaliths of patriarchy and capitalism 'at home'. The devastating consequences that such 'special relationships' are inflicting abroad are uncannily gestured towards in the spectral image of Colette Urban's *A song to sing, a tale to tell, a point to make* (1989; photo credit Elisabeth Feryn) that adorns the book's cover: gagged with black 'blindfold' and in ink-stained dress, Urban reaches out with prosthetic, white-gloved arms to a pock-marked and bullet-ridden globe. The 'war on terror' post-dates this and the other performances reviewed in, if not the publication of, *Radical Gestures* and while it already begs updating in this respect, its testimony of the catalytic role played by performance in articulating key issues and debates in second- and early third-wave feminisms and assertion of the continuing socio-political relevance of such concerns to the wider cultural sphere, make this an accessible, empowering and valuable source of reference for students across the board of the arts, education, humanities and social sciences.

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reference

Case, S.E. (1990) editor *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

doi:10.1057/fr.2010.7