Denise Stoklos

The Politics of Decipherability

Diana Taylor

I

The stage at La MaMa’s Annex theatre space in New York City is flat, white, and almost bare. Upstage center, a forest of thick ropes hangs from the ceiling. Upstage right, we can barely see the clotheshorse under a heavy fur coat. And on the opposite side of the stage a small, simple clothes rack and chair complete the minimalist effect of this stark setting. Eight TV sets hang suspended above the entire front of the stage, initially hidden by a black partition. The futuristic, gnawing strings of the Kronos Quartet ring out just as the flood of flat white light washes the stage. Off in the corner, poking out from the simple white curtain, we see a black-booted foot. In slow-motion, s/he walks onstage in exaggerated, giant steps (plate 1). Wearing a tuxedo, complete with vest and top hat, her look is enigmatic, androgynous. The suit is male-ish for a woman, though the curved lines and frilled shirt of the tuxedo make it feminine-ish for a man. Red lips prepare us for the mass of blond electric hair with the signature black roots that she sets free as she bows to the audience, removing her top hat. Half-Thoreau, half-ringmaster, she ushers in her own performance, minimalist in staging, maximalist in the intensity of the corporeal images that fill the space. Using mime, she writes illegible letters in the air. So begins this inquiry into transnational decipherability by Brazil’s most renowned solo performer, Denise Stoklos.

Civil Disobedience: Morning Is When I Am Awake and There Is an Aurora in Me (1999), based on texts by Henry David Thoreau as written, directed, and performed by Stoklos, explores the possibilities of freedom—political, individual, sexual, artistic—in a society that keeps people needy and confined. Then—Thoreau’s 19th-century New England—and now, in the throes of rampant capitalism at the end of the 20th century, this performance shows people weighed down, cramped, tormented, even driven to the point of madness by society’s imperative for compliance. “The twelve labors of Hercules,” Stoklos quotes Thoreau, “were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end” (1986:47). The narrative, like the clotheshorse, serves as a minimalist structure on which to hang her performance. Thoreau’s/Stoklos’s move to the woods (the forest of ropes bathed in green lighting) was meant as a temporary withdrawal from civilization in order to test those elements of life that were in fact “essential”
S/He withstands the pangs of loneliness for civilization, only to be carted off to jail (again, the ropes, now transformed by red lighting) for not paying taxes (plate 3). Upon release against her/his will the following day s/he understands that s/he is as “free” in society as out in the woods. The ropes, as both nature and jail, occupy the same mental space. Images of freedom, in Latin America as elsewhere, only exist in proximity to the reality of oppression. In a variety of registers, ranging from humor to poetic introspection to longing, Stoklos’s words and body language ask two recurring questions: What is essential to human happiness? How can we communicate with each other? The questions are urgent: Denise Stoklos performs against the clock. She has come, she tells us, to welcome the new millennium. The countdown, made visible on all eight TV sets, makes her hurry to get her message out, “while there is still life” (plate 4). Theatre, for Denise Stoklos, is neither about recreation nor entertainment: “It’s to gain time” (Stoklos 1992a:47).
What makes this performance so compelling, aside from the urgency of the questions, is Stoklos’s conceptual magic act—she juggles signs, images, words, gestures, keeping them all in the air at the same time. Pulling all sorts of modes out of her hat—circus, mime, vaudeville, Brechtian *gestus* and distanciation, striptease, philosophical declamation, clowning—she creates her own corporeal and verbal system of signs that spin in humorous counterpoint to each other. The text is a composite of Thoreau, Gertrude Stein, Paulo Freire, and scatological passages parodically attributed to the “Guide to Bodily Fluids.” As Thoreau, she pays tribute to his civil disobedience, even as she mimics the walls getting smaller. She calls her hilarious reading of Gertrude Stein’s story, “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene,” an example of acrobatics for the tongue: “they were gay there—not VERY gay, just gay there. [...] She was gay and that was it!” Gaily, she unmoors signifieds from their frenetic signifiers. She saves her rhapsodic voice for the reading of the pseudo-questionnaire asking us in which social situations we allow ourselves to fart. Now she is Elis Regina, the late Brazilian singer, urging us to leave a message inside a bottle in this shipwreck of a civilization. Now she is a socialite, turning herself inside out in front of the mirror to a ferocious tango (plate 5). Her face transforms into a series of masks, each more grotesque in her efforts to beautify herself (plates 6–9). An eyebrow pokes up, an eye seems to pop out, the top teeth protrude, the chin disappears in this face that contorts as easily as the body. She mimes adding makeup, then more makeup. She squeezes, prods, and pushes herself into her dress; her body crumbles under the weight of necklaces and rings. Her tormented face in the mirror growls: “Be careful. Be careful.” The “meaning” of the words has so little to do with their performative utterance. The whole performance, in the spirit of Pina Bausch, breaks down gesture, word, image, sound to its most essential unit—repeats, reformulates, and rehearses it in another key, another movement—always with the single purpose of establishing communication.

But it’s not just these rhythms—corporeal, vocal, and textual—that intersect, converge, and move apart. The Portuguese inflection of the English texts sends the words spinning off in yet another direction. Stoklos widens the distance between the “natural” and “acquired” language to further disrupt notions of normativity. Stoklos prefers to perform in the language of the audience—in Portuguese, English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, or Ukrainian—to facilitate communication. There is always another language co-existing within the language one hears. She has no English script for the performance—she translates as she goes along. In part, this is circumstantial: up
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until two days before opening Stoklos believed she would perform in Portuguese because the Annex is controlled by Equity, the actor’s union, which prohibits foreign actors from performing in English. But circumstances aside, she has long cultivated both the alienation and freedom produced by speaking in a foreign language:

I worked on two performances in England. Those two plays have been, for me, technically important. They incited the beginning of my personal research on graphic projection of the text. By this I mean the alienated verbal representation of a text that occurs, for instance, when a text is delivered in a foreign language. On this occasion, the experience of “feeling in Portuguese and expressing in English” revealed the denial of that emotional flowing that happens spontaneously when using the music of the first language. I perceived that this new alienation dramatized the encounter with oral signs contained in the musicality inherent to a foreign language. Within my research on the essentials of the theatre, the perception of “schizophrenia” caused by the clash between the sound and the meaning of the word shed a light on the verbal path I would pursue in my future work. (Stoklos 1992a:30)

In voluntary exile in England in the late 1970s (see “Theatre in Brazil” box) when she composed her first solo piece, she found English offered her “lightness,” one more means for transporting herself from the “vision and vicinity of torture and dictatorship” of the Brazilian military regime (1992a:32). When she performs Civil Disobedience in Portuguese, we hear her translate Thoreau’s English into her speech. Her ability to perform in these various languages in itself signals the history of migration, exile, and relocation shared by many Latin American artists.

Double-ness, then, is as much strategy as a circumstance. Nothing is transparent. We know each other, if at all, only in translation. In multiple registers, Stoklos’s work performs the obstacles to communication that she constantly alludes to. In one scene, she stages an encounter between two people by using only body language and two metal chairs. In a dance, holding the chairs at arm’s length, she moves through a sequence of motions and spaces. She then repeats the sequence with language. The language adds some clarity, but it too leaves much to our imagination. “Sometimes,” she concludes, addressing us directly, “we achieve communication. Sometimes not.” This reflection is followed by a long pause that speaks volumes (plates 10 and 11). Language, thus, serves simultaneously as a means of communication, an obstacle to communication, and one more signifying system. As the word “HONRA” (honor) pops up on all eight TV screens, it not only reiterates what Stoklos is saying—“Honor your words, your voice, your communication”—but also becomes a visual object in a
different communication system. Communication depends on making connections, however ephemeral and haphazard, through this semiotic maze, through this society of the spectacle that produces not clarity but confusion. Sometimes the message arrives, in the face of overwhelming odds, intact in the bottle. Sometimes not. Like the repeated gesture, the words caution us against believing in completion. One sequence tells of the Chinese Emperor’s bathtub, adorned with the mandate “renew yourself.” With the humor that characterizes the entire piece, Stoklos’s spasmodic dives into the tub remind us that the mandate needs to be performed again, and again, and again.

And through all of this, she looks at us squarely, addresses us directly, questioning our role in the meaning-making process.

II

So what does this magical juggling act communicate to spectators? And, of course, which spectators? Aside from the energy, the humor, and the corporeal and vocal dexterity of the performer, what else is in play? Being (for now) a creature of the very late 1990s in the U.S., the society of the split-screen scandal, I did what everyone else does: I polled my friends and acquaintances in New York City who had gone to see it. What did they think of the performance? One performer I know was very taken by the way that Denise Stoklos used the grotesque to challenge the social structuring of “white femininity.” Her face can twist into every imaginable shape. Some people loved her “cool” hair. Others loved her, passionately, period. One student said her work lacked originality, but he admired the effort she put into it. Is she gay, another wanted to know? Others found her work too “European” in the way it drew from traditions (mime, vaudeville, etc.) or avoided any specific “Latin American” references or issues. Others admired the extraordinary artistic rigor and richness of her performance. Some, including the reviewer from the New York Times (Bruckner 1999:E7), found her hilariously funny. A European colleague loved the interaction between Thoreau and Freire, and found it wonderful to hear a performer talk about education, poverty, taxes, and other social issues. A friend found the performance “very Latin American,” and the English hard to follow. One of my colleagues asked me if Denise Stoklos sought/addressed a “local” or “global” audience.

The results of my home-ethnography test puzzled me. What struck me, of course, were those comments that automatically turned the event into an indicator of a subaltern difference, formulated in terms of too much/too little, and then judged it for failing or succeeding on that level. The subaltern artist, asked to bear the full burden of ensuring communication, was nonetheless denied originality. If commentators recognized the traditions that enabled communication, then the work lacked originality. But if there was something that commentators suspected they didn’t grasp, it was deemed excessive and untranslatable. What I had found remarkable about Stoklos’s performance was its multimarkedness. Ethically, sexually, politically, aesthetically, and linguistically she refused any simple marking. Stoklos’s studied plurality was in itself an interesting artistic choice, in part because several of the best performance artists of her generation in Latin America—Jesusa Rodríguez and Astrid Hadad, to name two Mexican performers—have chosen to play with and reexamine some of the most “Latin American” of icons. They work to subvert the stereotypical images that have regulated the formulation of gender identity for Mexican women, from sainted mother—the Virgin of Guadalupe or Coatlicue, the Mexican “mother” of all Mexicans (plate 12, Jesusa Rodríguez)—to the macho woman with high heels and spurs (plate 13, Astrid Hadad). Hadad’s recent piece, Heavy Nopal (1998), suggests that the narrow grid provided by the stereotype which reduces and fixes a one-dimensional image serves only as a cri-
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tique for those who are able to see the violence of the framing. Hadad, in a *tableau vivant* of a Diego Rivera painting, humorously bears the weight of stereotypical accumulation and “anxious” repetition. She is all in one: the Diego Rivera girl holding calla lilies; the *soldadera* (or revolutionary fighter); the bejeweled Latina loaded down with rings, bracelets, and dangling earrings; the India with the hand-embroidered shirt, long black braids, and a bewildered look about her. The over-marked image of telegenic ethnicity signals the rigid structuring of cultural visibility. The parodic self-marking reads as one more repetition of the fact, one more proof of its fixity. Latin America is only visible through cliché, known solely “in translation.” Hadad plays with the anxiety behind these images of excess, pushing the most hegemonic of spectators to reconsider how these stereotypes of cultural/racial/ethnic difference are produced, reiterated, and consumed.

And yet Stoklos, who works with “Western” texts and performance techniques and who explicitly aspires to some “universal” message about communication is held to how much or how little she displays these same ethnic markings. When my friend said she found Stoklos “very Latin American” I knew that meant “excessive,” “emotional,” even “hysterical.” The comment “too European,” i.e., not Latin American enough, meant that the expectations created for the “exotic” or the “emotional” had not been met. My student’s comment about the lack of “originality” (for using some of those “Western” techniques) carried with it the assumption that Latin Americans do not belong to the West. It also overlooks the troubled issue of “originality” as applied to “Third World” contexts. Colonialism strips the “original”—as denoting cultural belonging and autochthonous expression—from the colonized and transfers it to the colonizer as a marker of cultural taste, privilege, and symbolic capital. Framing the argument in terms of “originality” not only repeats the charge of colonial mimeticism, but it mistakes the cultural gesture of appropriation and transculturation that has characterized Latin American artistic and intellectual formation for an indiscriminate borrowing. “Originality” in Latin American performance would have to be understood both in terms of autochthonous forms and the highly innovative ways artists appropriate forms that come from other cultural repertoires. The “very Latin American,” like the “too European” betrays a reductive notion of a naturalized cultural and group identity in/for Latin America—as if there were a Latin American way of being or performing. The degree to which performers resist or take on expectations renders the performance transparent (too European) or untranslat-
able (too Latin American). Thus, the “Latin American,” as I heard it, suggested a way of closing down, rather than expanding, the field of cultural recognition.

III

The power and originality of Stoklos’s work, to my mind, lies in the humor and intensity with which she transforms the most disparate artistic and political traditions into a forceful and highly personal performance project. In her 30 years as an artist, she has explored the quirky mix of Brazilian militarism and postmodern alienation (Casa, 1990; plate 14); responded to the ongoing effects of colonialism (500 Years—A Fax from Denise Stoklos to Christopher Columbus, 1992; plate 15); reflected on the torturous political and personal pulls on women, as political leaders (Denise Stoklos in Mary Stuart, 1987; plate 16) and as mothers (Des-Média, 1995; plate 17); and examined the political options facing citizens at the end of the 20th century (Civil Disobedience, 1998). Each of these performances draws from the repertoire of artistic traditions that I allude to in relation to Civil Disobedience—mime, vaudeville, Brechtian epic theatre, juggling, and other recognizable forms—to convey a message that is uncompromisingly her own. Stoklos makes it a point to cite the traditions that formed her as an artist—thus she always includes a short mime sequence. However, she rejects the political neutrality of mime, and uses it only to further her own project, which is firmly positioned and committed. Denise Stoklos’s address to Columbus, as the title indicates, is absolutely personal, direct, and contemporary. She explores the role of the artist, the intellectual, the theatre, and the audience in the tragic history of her country. “Read it,” she says, “it’s all in the books.” Later, once the audience fully comprehends the magnitude of her critique, she has the house lights turned up: “The doors of the theatre are open for those who want to abandon this ship in flames” (1992b:9).

Denise Stoklos, through her own body, explores the ways in which gender, sexuality, power, and familial bonds pull and push in a woman’s flesh. Can we undo the historical trajectory of killings and opt for life-affirming strategies—be they ideological, political, or personal/familial? Stoklos’s work is polyvalent, allowing for unusually divergent readings.

In Brazil, Stoklos’s audiences recognize her fierce engagement with national politics. A production of hers is an event that receives national attention.¹ At a 1999 festival of her work in São Paulo that I attended, the audiences of mainly university-aged Brazilians were deeply moved by each of her performances. Every show was sold out, and every night brought a thunderous standing ovation. The theatre was plas-

¹ Plates 6-9. Denise Stoklos transforms her face into a series of masks, each more grotesque in her efforts to beautify herself. (Photos by Thais Stoklos Kiguel)
tered inside and out with wall-size photographs of Stoklos’s facial expressions, taken by her daughter Thais Stoklos Kignel (plate 18). Even the floors and elevators reflected her presence.

Stoklos’s status as a national icon stems, in part, from her innovative artistic work. She is the first solo performance artist from Latin America, in the way commentators tend to think of solo performance in the U.S. at least. Her precursors there might be the vaudeville artists and cabaret stars of the 1950s and 1960s—Elis Regina, Chavela Vargas, La Lupe, Chabuca Granda. Her book, *The Essential Theatre*, outlines her project of using minimal resources—“gestures, movement, words, wardrobe, scenery, accessories and effects” (1992:5) to the maximum artistic and political effect (see “Essential Theatre” box).

For Denise Stoklos, a Brazilian artist who learned her trade during a period of military dictatorship, censorship, and state violence (1964–1985), multivalent virtuosity takes into account both the demand for clarity and the oppositional tactic of selective or partial visibility.

In opting for solo performance, Stoklos went against the prevailing political and artistic style of the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Cuban revolution had promoted the ethos of collectivity, a concept that organized everything from neighborhoods to theatre groups. Many of Brazil’s (and Latin America’s) most important artists of the period forged collectives to continue their artistic and political work in the face of criminal politics. Augusto Boal worked with
other important artists in the Teatro Arena in São Paulo, Enrique Buenaventura started Teatro Experimental de Cali (T.E.C.) in Colombia, Yuyachkani (Peru’s foremost theatre collective) began working in Peru, and so on. It went against the thinking of the times to stage solo work. Even amateur performers formed groups to engage in street theatre, staging pieces that spoke to the current political situation in the favelas and other “popular” neighborhoods. The political instrumentality of performance of this period made it difficult for theatre practitioners and artists who went into exile to continue their work. Deprived of their groups, their audiences, and their contexts, most exiled artists either stopped creating for a time or taught in theatre schools. Stoklos, however, used the period of exile during the ’70s to train herself as a solo performer. Even so, “solo” doesn’t mean “alone.” She is always in conversation, artistically and ideologically, with others who have

12. Jessa Rodriguez’s version of Coatilcue, the Mexican “mother” of all Mexicans. (Photo courtesy of Jessa Rodriguez)

13. Astrid Hadad, in a tableau vivant of a Diego Rivera painting, is all in one: the girl holding cala lilies, the soldadera, the bejeweled Latina, and India with embroidered shirt and long black braids. Heavy Nopal, 1998. (Photo by Pancho Gilardi)
Selections from *The Essential Theatre*
by Denise Stoklos
edited and translated by Diana Taylor

from “Manifesto of Essential Theatre” (1987)

Essential Theatre: “A theatre that has the minimum possible gestures, movements, words, wardrobe, scenery, accessories and effects but which contains the maximum dramatic power.”

“The human figure onstage performs a unique alchemy.”

“I want the stage naked.”

“I want no decoration.”

“I want it dry.”

“Throw away the brooch. Put the chest onstage.”

“As an actor, director and author, I am always questioning power, social injustice, normative behaviors, aesthetics, and the workings of the State in this capitalist, patriarchal system. I am less and less interested in the microcosmic movements of society [...]. More and more, I am becoming an anarchist. I laugh more and more at politicians. I save myself by following my own personal, unique path.”

“If my students asked me what to do, I would answer: Invent something.”

“I do not have the slightest belief in immediate results.”

“I hate most of the rules of our social organization. Accepted behaviors and bourgeois aesthetic tastes [...] seem anti-life to me.”

“To believe in the actor as the source of theatricality itself in a Utopian force.”

“I miss no chance to display myself in my full femininity, which is peculiar, unique.”

“I do not participate in political demonstrations in my country anymore. Not even against censorship. Because I am against the censorship of those who demonstrate there.”

“After three months in New York, I found an unopened bottle of grape juice in my refrigerator marked Cr$ 12.00. When I went shopping, the same one cost Cr$ 48.00. I do not forget the poverty in Brazil, the poverty in Latin America, the poverty of the bread-less, the home-less, the school-less, the poverty of selfishness, the poverty of ideals, cultural poverty, television poverty, the poverty of human relationships, the poverty of health, the poverty of dreams, the poverty of the lottery, of remedies, of despair, of loneliness. The Brazilian poverty.”
“I always come back home to Brazil. I always want to be with my children. We are trying to stay in our homeland.”

“I remember one day in the ’60s when I wrote: ‘The American astronaut landed on the moon today. The monopoly has expanded throughout the universe.’ Today, after two decades of absurd wars (Vietnam, the Gulf War, Croatia), I consider myself victorious in my activist pacifist creative resistance—with a very special family, a personal theatre, and wildly happy.”

from “A Brazilian Proposal” (1992)

“It’s necessary to situate historically the birth of the idea of an essential theatre. From 1964 to 1977, censorship had taken hold in Brazil. This 13-year period overshadowed my first professional contact with theatre. I began writing, directing, producing, and acting in 1968 [...]. An open expression of style or focus was prohibited, discouraged both by the military and by the terrorized civil society. Being a woman (in Brazil women are still not recognized as authors) and coming from the marginalized South (in my country not even the Southern accent makes it on the stage), I had already experienced the isolation that motivated my critique. I amassed a repertoire of revolutionary impulses. No negotiation or simple reform could satisfy my organic need for change. From early on, my artistic choice was clearly for a theatre that would not reproduce proposals developed by others, but for a theatre that sought its own voice and corporeality.”

After training in her native Paraná, then Rio, then São Paulo, Stoklos went into voluntary exile in England. She gave birth to two children, an experience that she describes as transformative in her artistic development: “Motherhood put me in contact with what was most intrinsic in my artistic path. I started searching, more rigorously than ever before, not for the superfluous, the disposable, but for the essential.”

“I worked on several performances in England. They prompted my research into the graphic projection of the text, which later became an important part of my solo work. By this I mean the alienated verbal representation of a text that occurs, for example, when a text is delivered in a foreign language. The expression of ‘feeling in Portuguese’ and ‘communicating in English’ reveals the denial of the emotional flow that occurs spontaneously when one uses one’s native language. I perceived that this divergence dramatized the encounter between signs [...] between the sound and the meaning of the word. That research shed light on the verbal path of my future stage work.”
fought for freedom. Her last words to Elis Regina, in her one-woman homage, maps out the trajectory of solidarity: Stoklos quotes Regina who in turn sings a famous line by one of Latin America’s best-known singers, Mercedes Sosa, “Yo tengo tantos hermanos que no los puedo contar” (I have so many brothers/sisters that I can’t count them all).

In the U.S., the issues, the stakes, and the viable spaces of contestation are profoundly different. While discussions about colonialism, militarism, political freedom, and regulatory systems of gender and sexuality are also intensely politicized within the U.S., international dialogue about them, even among progressives, usually remain in the realm of wishful thinking. The strategies, the gestures, the corporeal and symbolic languages used to express them reflect the cultural specificity of their articulation and threaten to render them “untranslatable” in another context. In a manner as humorous, but perhaps more difficult to recognize than in Heavy Nopal, Stoklos too plays with the epistemological grid of understanding by staging the now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t of the seemingly transparent. What makes it through the hegemonic filters, artistically or politically?

This playful hide-and-seek, unnoticed by respondents to my do-it-myself poll, is one of the characteristics I find “very Latin American.” Although Stoklos performs it, moving in and out of the ropes, stripping, dressing, camouflaging, transforming before our eyes, it goes unnoticed as a strategy because it’s antithetical, according to the grid, to a “Latin America” that is fixed, known, repeated, and absolutely accessible to us. So, what would it mean to refer to hide-and-seek as a “Latin American” strategy? It might refer to a broad range of cultural practices that, since the conquest of the Americas, have seemed suspiciously inaccessible to its colonizers. Even though State and Church authorities imposed strict regulations for how native peoples could dress, live, worship, celebrate, and so forth, the extant writings transmit the uneasy conviction that for all their watchfulness, the Europeans were nonetheless missing the point. The colonizer/colonized spectacle is always double-coded. Something else is always happening beneath the seemingly transparent routines imposed by the new masters. The multicode cultural practices have, if anything, become even more dynamic with the passing of centuries. The native and African populations of the Americas have always found ways of
transmitting their performative practices under the very noses of the ruling groups, as did the *conversos*, Jews, and other marginalized people. This skill, long a survival strategy, has also at times been converted into an art form. For Denise Stoklos, a Brazilian artist who learned her trade during a period of military dictatorship, censorship, and state violence (1964–1985), multivalent virtuosity takes into account both the demand for clarity and the oppositional tactic of selective or partial visibility.

Let’s look, for a moment, at the relationship between sexuality and freedom. Brazil, unlike other Latin American countries under dictatorship during the same period, seemed to allow for greater physical and sexual “freedom,” though people were denied freedom of speech and other civil rights. The image of a sexy, multiracial body was Brazil’s greatest export. Carnival and samba, Brazil’s two best-known cultural products, both glorify sensuous, undulating, seemingly unrepressed flesh. The body as both an economic and political commodity functioned as a signifier of a freedom only skin-deep, part of a double spectacle; or rather, a spectacle within a spectacle—somewhat along the lines of what Guy Debord calls the military (or “concentrated”) spectacle functioning within the more “diffuse” spectacle of global capitalism (1983:63). The body, for the military, does one thing. The words go someplace else.

Indecipherability, then, has long been a strategy for combating the exigencies that everything be transparent, available for immediate decoding. Ambiguity subverts the demand for decipherability and strict compliance. In a social situation demanding strict gender and sexual formation as integral to the political performance of national “being,” not being available for easy reading was both a danger and a form of civil disobedience. Humor, for Stoklos and other Latin American performers, provides the vehicle for the multcoded communi-

16. Denise Stoklos in Mary Stuart, 1987, a piece reflecting on the torturous pulls of political power. (Photo by Isla Jay)

17. Des-Medéia, Stoklos’s 1995 performance, in which Medea chooses not to kill her children. (Photo by Sergio Divitis)
cation. Predicated on unexpected juxtapositions, subversions, reconfigurations, her humor hints at other possible meanings, doubleness, multivalence.

Stoklos, who had worked in theatre in Brazil as a playwright, actor, and director from 1968 until she left for England in 1979, learned a couple of new languages—one linguistic, one aesthetic. English, as I mentioned previously, offered “lightness.” Working on solo performance offered a zone of expressive and political possibility during a period in which group disobedience was dangerous in the extreme. Better to stage one’s own solo act of resistance. Perhaps one point of convergence that drew Stoklos to Thoreau was their shared affinity for this “solo” political performance. “The only obligation which I have the right to assume,” Stoklos says, quoting from Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*, “is to do at any time what I think is right” (1986:387). Both withdrew from their world, temporarily, not to escape but to reinterpret it, to dis-identify, to retool. Civil disobedience, for Thoreau and for Stoklos, is a solo practice, the politics of nonparticipation, the anti-identity, anti-cathartic politics of individual resistance, the politics of the one. For Stoklos, corporeal language could say what words could not. The “scenic body” (Stoklos 1992a:26) assumes the responsibility of communicating, of re-opening the venues closed down by the terror systems, silencing, and exile.

There is nothing parodic in the way she assumes the power, authority, control, and physical strength usually bestowed on the masculine, nor in the way she exalts in the pleasure, vulnerability, and expressivity of the body associated with the feminine.

This political context leads to a somewhat “different” kind of political performance than much of what my friends and acquaintances see in New York. The aims, and thus the strategies, differ. Several of the best U.S. solo performers—Peggy Shaw, Kate Bornstein, Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, John Leguizamo, Marga Gomez, Carmelita Tropicana, Deb Margolin, Spalding Gray, to name a few—draw from autobiographical material. They write their own material, recalling their personal experiences with menopause, sex changes, coming out, dis/owning one’s body, growing up in a dysfunctional family, Alzheimer’s, exile, and religious formation. Often in the first person, the performances tend to privilege language over corporeality and rely on identification with an audience they recognize as their own. The humor, the intensity, the beauty of these performances often stems from taking the small, the personal, the confessional, and making it speak to a community organized around (but not limited to) an “identity.” Latinos/as, gay/lesbians, and feminists find in these artists a space for identification, for mutual recognition, for being other than that which is regulated by dominant culture. These performances legitimate alternativity through irony, humor, joy. They are often associated with specific venues (off-off-Broadway) and audiences are self-selected around specific “issues.”

Stoklos, perhaps more in the vein of Anna Deveare Smith, takes another route in solo performance, allowing her body to channel (rather than own) a whole range of positions. Their work is intensely “personal” as far as their political and aesthetic projects are concerned, but not autobiographical. Nor do they address like-minded audiences. Rather than the inside-out approach described above, these two artists go from the outside-in. Anna Deveare Smith...
Denise Stoklos has stated that an actor can get inside a character through language: if we learn to say the words of another, we will be able to somehow feel what they feel, and understand why they do as they do. Neither of them uses their own words, although they very much conceive of and create their own texts. Rather, it is precisely by incorporating these other words, other languages, other ways of thinking that the two performers allow for the interpersonal and intergroup (be it racial or national) communication they both see as key to their political projects. Stoklos, somewhat along the lines of many of her Latin American contemporaries, thinks of herself as a revolutionary: she seeks a profound and radical transformation in the individual’s way of thinking and acting. But, again ironically, she is more of a revolutionary along the lines of the anarchistic, individualistic Thoreau than along the lines of Fidel or Ché or Sandino. Too many failed revolutions later, Stoklos cannot subscribe to the cathartic, identificatory, restrictive programs they have set in motion.

This is not to say that Stoklos doesn’t worry about the other issues—such as gender and sexuality—that concern some of these other artists. Even though her reflections are not attached to a personal narrative, they continually spin before our eyes. As a performer, Stoklos seems to have equal access to the broad spectrum of genders normally reduced and dichotomized as male/female. But she does not engage in drag, if by that we mean a conscious, parodic masquerading or un-masquerading of “opposite” gender roles. There is nothing parodic in the way she assumes the power, authority, control, and physical strength usually bestowed on the masculine, nor in the way she exalts in the pleasure, vulnerability, and expressivity of the body associated with the feminine. Rather, she challenges the normative system that assigns “masculinity” exclusively to males and “femininity” to females. The critique, as the makeup sequence described above makes clear, lies in the way that we are forced to fit into the reductive strictures of stereotypical gender roles.

Androgyny, however, is not a popular category for some queer theorists in the U.S. The move in the U.S. that is seen as most politically radical involves a more explicit, categorical presentation. The disparagement stems from the way in which androgyny has been mobilized to foreclose, rather than pry open, the complicated relationships between gender and sexual “acts.” And there is a way in which Stoklos’s performance, while challenging restrictive gender paradigms, stops short of linking gender performances to sexual practice. Besides the Steinian moment of “being gay there, not VERY gay, just gay,” her sexuality is indecipherable because of the anti-autobiographical nature of Stoklos’s performance. One could argue that, once again, the performance stages the rupture between the corporeal and the speakable. Stoklos’s body performs one thing and speaks another. She dismantles normative femininity and masculinity as a dressing up and stripping down, she performs gayness through Stein, she exerts her physical strength in the swinging of the chairs, and allows for sensuousness and vulnerability. She laments our inability to make use of our full range of body, thought, and being. Her body and her words call for more options, an expansion of our current expressivity. But what works physically as a challenge to limitations can also (as the disparagement about androgyny suggests) be seen as working discursively as its opposite—subsuming issues of sexuality under the blanket of “oppression”—a clumping together, rhetorically, that works against the performance of prying open. However, this discussion too benefits from a broader intercultural dialogue. Rather than dismiss this kind of performance of ambiguity as nonpolitical or “unqueer,” Sylvia Molloy encourages us to look at “posing” and other forms of “unpatriotic” gender practices as “a significant political performance and a founding queer cultural practice” (Molloy and McKee Irwin 1998:xiv). The discussion that opens up around the seemingly transparent is-
Theatre in Brazil 1968 to the Present

A Brief Overview

The information listed below is drawn, where indicated, from Teatro Brasileiro: Um Panorama do Século XX, São Paulo: Clovis Levi, 1997, and was edited and translated by Diana Taylor.

1968!

“The Congress was closed, newspapers were invaded, bombs were left in theaters, the witch-hunt had begun again, there was a new exile of Brazil’s intelligentsia, the prisons were filled with the left again (artists, students, intellectuals and politicians). While the ‘Brazilian miracle’ proved to be an exciting economy for the rich, the poor continued in misery” (TB:120).

“General Garrasta Médici stated that Brazil was ‘an island of tranquility’ [...] and ‘we are living in a time of Great Brazil.’ In actual fact, we were living in a time of ‘great’ torture. And the ‘great’ censorship in the press prevented the torture being made known” (TB:121).

The AI-5 edict, which imposed broad-range censorship, was in effect from December 1969 through December 1978: “It was decreed that books (including plays) and periodicals should be read by censors before being published” (TB:125).

“Banned were works by Brazilian theatre practitioners: Dias Gomes, Grupo Opinião, Reinaldo Jardim, Plínio Marcos, Oswald de Andrade, Jorge Andrade, José Vicente, Antônio Bivar, Maria Clara Machado, Nelson Rodrigues, Augusto Boal, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Jota Dangelo, Mário de Andrade, and Consuelo de Castro, as well as Bertolt Brecht” (TB:120).

“How did Brazilian theatre live with the terror of those years, when an artist was always seen either as an enemy or as somebody to be bought? Various sectors of our theatre became more and more united against the common enemy. Resistance spread. The censors also widened their claws. In one of the innumerable debates held by artists in search of an escape, Nelson Xavier affirmed that, with the censors banning texts that critically discussed the Brazilian situation, the only possible theme for dramatists was the terrible ‘impossibility to write’” (TB:121).

“The death of the word was decreed and the cult of the body was born” (TB:123).

“In professional theatre, resistance came through attempts to trick the censors. And in order to escape the economical trap, individual producers disappeared (worried about the insecurity the censors imposed on them) and cooperatives took their place. In amateur theatre—a fantastic fighting trench—already mostly cooperative by its own nature, resistance came in many ways. Throughout the country, amateur groups multiplied, with the objective of producing plays that spoke about our difficult conditions of survival. [...] Many theatre companies adopted a system of collective creation [...] Amateurs kept theatre alive” (TB:124).
Denise Stoklos

Teatro Arena, the experimental theatre-in-the-round that was founded in São Paulo by José Renato Pecora in 1953, became increasingly oppositional with the arrival of Augusto Boal, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, and Oduvaldo Vianna Filho in 1961. Their most famous productions, *Arena conta Zumbi* (Arena Tells the Story of Zumbi, 1965) and *Arena conta Tiradentes* (Arena Tells the Story of Tiradentes, 1967) staged popular confrontations with political repression.

Chico Buarque, Antunes Filho, and other important artists continued to write and direct pieces that challenged the censorship imposed by the military government.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, an important street theatre movement (*teatro da rua*) also challenged the dictatorship. These groups used clowning techniques, mime, metaphor, and other performance strategies “to talk about theatre without talking about theatre,” as Wilson Loria, a former performer told me in an interview (1999). These groups went into the *favelas* (slums) or staged impromptu performances on street corners to address the current political situation. Because of the exorbitant price of the “teatrão” or professional theatre, the teatro da rua played a very important role in Brazil during the military dictatorship. These techniques were also used by professional theatre people like Boal, who used them as early as 1964 to critique the U.S. role in Cuban affairs, and continued to use them as part of his Legislative Theatre exercises.

In 1975, the experimental theatre from SESC (see below) “performed *Dessana, Dessana*, by Márcio Souza and Aldisio Filgueiras, about the myth of the creation of the world along the long frontier between Brazil and Colômbia. A special performance for representatives of various indigenous nations in the region [of the Amazon] was mounted. From that moment, various tribes from the River Negro, worried about the loss of their culture, began to write down their sagas, in order to make their heroes and goddesses more permanent, in the hope—who knows?—of one day being able to return to their ancient and free rituals” (TB:129).

Because of the inadequate resources for a solid, hemispheric production infrastructure, Latin American theatre people only got to know each other through theatre festivals held in different Latin American countries. “Festivals were always a meeting point for exchanging ideas, themes and techniques” (TB:129).

1971 “Augusto Boal was arrested and after being released, exiled himself in Europe” (TB:125).

1971 “Members of the Living Theatre were [detained] for possession of drugs and expelled from Brazil” (TB:125).

“During these last decades [1960s and 1970s] Brazilian theatre has been characterized by individual productions as opposed to productions mounted by theatre companies” (TB:127).

**Performance and Public Policy**

In São Paulo, in the 1970s, a group dedicated to supporting various community activities (performing arts and sports) convinced businesses in the city to create and fund SESC—Social Service for Commerce. To-
day, SESC runs five state-of-the-art theatres in São Paulo. Without help from the government, it promotes innovative work by national artists, invites international artists, and sponsors a broad range of programming—including the festival I attended in 1999 on solo performance, which highlighted the work of Denise Stoklos. The founders of SESC realized that Brazilians could not count on a sane or stable government policy for the arts. Fernando Coller, the “democratically” elected president of Brazil, continued the “cultural terrorism” of the previous dictatorship, dismantling the National Foundation of Scenic Arts.

**Theatre and Performance in the 1990s**

The 1990s have seen a move away from the explicitly political theatre of the 1970s and ’80s. Many of the same artists continue to work, but their productions are quite different from the work previously associated with them. Augusto Boal directed *Carmen*, the Bizet opera. The music and lyrics, though essentially the same, now had the marked Brazilian rhythm of samba. While Boal continues his work with the Center for Theatre of the Oppressed, he says that no one is interested in political theatre in Brazil any longer. Teatro Oficina, closed by the police who arrested their director, José Celso, in 1974, staged *Ham-let* in their magnificent new theatre in São Paulo in 1993. Antunes Filho, a major theatre practitioner who directed the Brazilian classic *Macunaima* in 1979, was back, directing *Gilgamesh* at SESC (1995). Many productions were new versions of works by classic Brazilian writers: Nelson Rodrigues, Guimarães Rosa, Oswald de Andrade, and others. Some new practitioners began to gain prominence with avantgarde productions: Gerald Thomas directed Fernanda Montenegro in *The Flash and Crash Days* (1992). And, as always in Latin America, a large number of the productions consisted of reworkings of “world” classics—*Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1992), *Candide* (1993), *Peer Gynt* (1994), selections from Oscar Wilde (1994), *Trilogy of Thebes* (1994), and *Pericles* (1995). Still, there was almost nothing in the way of solo performance. Gilberto Gawronski developed *Night Flower*, his solo performance about AIDS, centered on the pansexual figure, Dana Avalon. But even the series on solo performance sponsored by SESC in 1999 had only one performer that would fall into that category as it is understood in the U.S.—Denise Stoklos. The other artists featured in the series were singers.

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1999 Interview with author. New York, 12 November.
sues of politics, gender, and sexuality, I would argue, highlights the indecipherability produced when two political imperatives run into each other—the politics of ambiguity stemming from Latin America is at odds with the U.S. identity politics that demands definition.

IV

Why is it so urgent that performance theorists focus on intercultural spectatorship, on the ways that we understand or misunderstand each other across cultural and national borders? As systems of circulation—economic, cultural, migratory—undergo change as part of globalization, we are confronted with new systems of control and centralization in which we play a part. While performances have long traveled (usually one-way) from the centers to the colonial peripheries, we now live in an environment of far greater and seemingly multidirectional cultural circulation. This circulation takes several shapes. We have the “prefabricated” productions such as Cats and Miss Saigon that play simultaneously in New York, London, and Mexico City. These are cultural commodities, objects that change little if at all in transit. Secondly, folkloric shows continue to let “third world” products into “first world” stages: performances of the Ballet Folklórico, tango, and flamenco fall into neat categories that confirm what we already know about these “excessive” cultures. We have some artistically innovative international performances traveling to alternative spaces—such as Civil Disobedience playing at La MaMa. Then we have what my colleague calls the “global” circuit—the “world-class” performances by the Robert Wilsons, Pina Bauschs, Phillip Glasses, and Tadashi Suzukis showcased in huge productions for the cultural elite in the world’s great cities. In short, cultural production plays an important though too often unexamined role in what usually gets talked about as financial “flows.” The global city, as Saskia Stoklos

18. In 1999, Stoklos’s work was featured in a São Paulo festival. Inside, wall-size photographs of Stoklos’s facial expressions taken by her daughter Thais Stoklos Kignon surrounded audience members. (Photo by Diana Taylor)
Sassen argues in her book by that title (1991), earns that stature in part through the concentration and diversity of the cultural commodities it can furnish for its affluent, urban, new professionals. Moreover, global cities are linked to each other, sharing more products (including cultural) with each other than they might with the other cities and towns in the countries where they happen to be situated. The re-territorialization, however, leads to a different structure of relatively closed systems along new class formations. For, on the other end of the same process, we see the rapidly increasing immigrants and minority groups that take the low-paying jobs servicing these new professionals. These “service” groups also demand and create cultural products. In New York, for example, mural art, *casitas* (community houses), and community sculptures function as ways in which minority communities “upgrade” and “make home” their new environment.

Globalization, then, has furnished us with a variation on the old center-periphery model of colonialism. Now the center and the periphery often occupy the same space, in concentric circles rather than a linear direction, here/there. It has also ushered in new problems in thinking about location and situatedness—ones that take into account that populations reside in certain places more because of financial and political imperatives than ethnic or national ones. “Latin America” no longer signifies a readily recognizable space or population over there. The elite in Latin America have apartments in New York, and more ties to other economic leaders worldwide than to the majority of people in their country of origin. The migrant Latin American worker has become the pan-ethnic bus-boy clearing tables at chic restaurants in SoHo. In Latin American countries too the past 500 years have been marked by all sorts of invasions, migrations, and other forms of relocation. Brazil has the second largest Japanese population in the world, while Buenos Aires’s Jewish population is second only to New York in the Americas. There is no one language, artistic or linguistic, associated with either the Northern or Southern hemisphere. What do judgments such as “too Latin American” or “too European” mean in the face of these realities? The urgency for developing a more informed and nuanced trans-, cross-, or inter-cultural spectatorship increases as we try to understand our role as intellectuals, theorists, and artists in a rapidly changing system that affects both our understanding of the local and the international arenas as deeply interconnected. Cultural competence now involves not just an understanding of transculturation that explains how cultural systems undergo change through contact with “foreign” influences—though that would be a start (Taylor 1991:148–80). It requires an understanding of how performances—as commodities, as art objects, as upgrading processes, as vehicles for expression and communication—move within and as part of larger economic and ideological networks, linking São Paulo to New York, for example, or Broadway to the Lower East Side. Broadway shows and the Lower East Side murals are flip sides of the same spectacle in Debord’s understanding of the term: “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (1983:4). The transnational circuits that create one create the other. Cultural production needs to be seen as part of a more mobile, less geographically bound system of interaction and connection.

Performances not only participate in these systemic international “flows,” they have also long served as a site for cross-cultural inquiry. Louis Althusser, in *For Marx*, noted that “performance is fundamentally the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition” (1969:149). As the anthropologist Victor Turner wrote, performances offer the occasion for intragroup dialogue: “We will know one another better by entering one another’s performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies” (in Schechner and Appel 1990:1). So performance, which by definition stages the intragroup encounter, be-
comes an ideal site for this exploration. Performance not only functions as an indicator of global processes, it also opens a space for thinking about them, and about our habits of response. Bad (cultural) habits: to think about performance as object or commodity, rather than as a collective exercise; to label as “critical thinking” what is, in fact, the reaffirmation of exhausted categories. Performances can challenge our assumptions about our role as spectators and our own cultural positioning.

Intercultural performance, theorists have reiterated throughout most of this century, requires a new kind of spectatorship—a dialectic spectatorship (for Althusser) that demands a break both with the “identification” model and its opposite—the one that places the spectator outside the production: “Mother Courage is presented to you. It is for her to act. It is for you to judge. On the stage the image of blindness—in the stalls the image of lucidity” (1969:148). The identification model, which Althusser critiques as reducing “social, cultural and ideological consciousness” to “a purely psychological consciousness” (149) has also been charged by theorists such as Boal with disempowering spectators, turning them into passive onlookers of the actions and emotions of the high-and-mighty. The second model—the nonreflective distancing—seems to me at the heart of the hegemonic spectatorship I alluded to earlier. Here the spectator, not the protagonist, is empowered and claims “absolute consciousness of self” (148). But this is very different from the spectators that Boal advocates for, the disempowered social actors who rightly fight for an active role in the social struggles that involve them. Hegemonic spectators profit from nonidentification. As Althusser’s image of the “judge” indicates, these spectators enjoy the superiority and power that accompanies the lofty position of sentencing without ever feeling oneself implicated in the proceedings. The problems of hegemonic spectatorship are even more accentuated in the realm of intercultural performance, where people feel even less implicated in the ideological construction of the performance and even more empowered to demand access. The onus is on the performance, not the spectator, to create meaning. The subject matter, style, or language should not be too foreign (just foreign enough). This is a different kind of “critical” distancing—power masquerading as aesthetics, taste as value. Spectators, secure in their position of the imperial eye/I outside the frame, pass judgment. Instead of breaking down our responses, as spectators, we might simply repeat them. Cultural habits dress up as critique. Yet the critique that shakes everyone’s assumptions about our place in the spectacle as “a social relation among people” might only be able to come from the margins. The aim of our efforts, as one of my students put it, is “to re-educate the epistemological privilege of the ordinary spectator” (Mustapha 1998).

Stoklos’s performance, Civil Disobedience, offers a model for intercultural communication in the face of overwhelming odds. On one hand, this is very much an international performance—one that travels from São Paulo to New York, and soon to the other great cities. It is also international in its form, drawing from philosophical texts, circus traditions, mime, and other Western aesthetic and political repertoires. It stages an international dialogue on topics of “universal” significance, and its protagonists (Thoreau, Freire, Stein) are well known. The words have all been written. They are pronounced in the spectator’s own language. Yet, while on one level the performance functions in the global circuits of cultural flows, in no way does it sustain the ideology of control and management that only occasionally tries to pass itself off as communication.

On the contrary: Stoklos whispers, growls, and sings “Be careful.” It is not so easy to achieve communication. Intercultural or international dialogue is even more difficult, and often treacherous. It turns, too often, into power’s megalomaniac monologue with itself. Intercultural communication is not a “thing known”; our grid can’t frame or capture “it.” A praxis rather than an
episteme, it can never be assumed, access is never given but always learned. Multiculturalism, erroneously to my mind, held out the promise of cultural understanding. I would propose that we begin with the assumption that we don’t understand, that we always engage in acts of translation. The task of working towards intercultural communication (as opposed to consuming others), Stoklos proposes, is urgent. She takes the first giant, though careful, step forward, ushering in the event that brings the past into dialogue with our future, the over-there into the here and now. That here and now is not a stable place but a configuration of elements in constant flux. Some spectators will recognize some of those elements—maybe the Gertrude Stein, or the Paulo Freire, or the mime gestures—and not others. We are all equidistant from the multicultural repertoire of images. How do all the different conversations, signs, movements make sense together? Stoklos, looking at us, communicating with us through languages, images, gestures, movement, challenges us to recognize the urgency with which we too must struggle for communication. Sometimes the words are incomprehensible, the gesture tentative, the meaning fragmented or incomplete. Sometimes we understand each other. Sometimes not. Will we be able to make out the message in the bottle? What if we could? Stoklos’s performance demands an act of imagination from us. This is not the Aristotelian urging that we learn to accept the impossible plausibility (as opposed to the possible implausibility) when watching a performance (Aristotle 1973:66). She demands that we imagine our interrelatedness otherwise; the occasions for interaction and conversation are far more numerous and flexible than we now imagine. Stranger things have happened: Thoreau engages in a contemporary conversation with Freire, a hundred years his junior. The encounter between thinkers, pacifists, educators, and poets from different parts of the world has already produced a transgenerational, transnational discourse about freedom and social justice and has led to social visions and political projects as different as Thoreau’s, Gandhi’s, Kierkegaard’s, and Marx’s. Intercultural communication is not just wishful thinking; it’s a collective exercise that works towards the creation of what Arjun Appadurai calls a “diasporic public sphere” (1996:22). Through her work, Stoklos affirms not just its potentiality, but its existence. It is with humor, conviction, and courage that she urges us to join her, to add our voices and body language and knowledges to the already vast repertoire of cultural gestures. Together, we will make meaning, or we’ll keep trying—again, and again, and again.

Notes

1. *Walden* (1854) and *Civil Disobedience* (1849).
2. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.
3. Stoklos has won the Best Actress award nine times in Brazil; she has been the recipient of a Guggenheim award, a Fulbright, and her work has been translated and staged in 31 countries.
4. At the time he wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord did not see the two spectacles as connected. Only in his later work, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, did he see the two as working together, as the “integrated” spectacle.

The controlling centre has now become occult: never to be occupied by a known leader, or a clear ideology. And on the more diffuse side, the spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behaviour and objects. [...] When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. (1998:9)
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