



Spreafico/Eckly's  
*What a Classic Is and  
How It Performs in (Our)  
Time.* Paul McCarthy,  
*Rocky, 1976*, Oslo, 2016.  
Photo: Kjetil Kausland

# Up Front

## PAST FORWARD

*Tom Sellar*

This edition of *Theater* centers on creative imaginings of futurity for the stage, as diverse as prospective new architectures for performance, Afrofuturism, and Forced Entertainment's bold temporal speculations. One of the biggest surprises, as these projects came together on the page, was to see how closely knotted future visions are to the past. Even in art, history instructs and predicts future actions. Careful consideration of lineages and linkages can open pathways to our next lives. Two recent examples came to this critic's attention.

At Oslo's Black Box Teater in March 2016, the artistic duo Spreafico/Eckly (in collaboration with Sergiu Matis) staged an original event reenacting, blow for blow, Paul McCarthy's twenty-minute 1976 video *Rocky*. McCarthy films himself naked and in boxing gloves, punching and smearing his body with ketchup, an act of self-visceration referencing Sylvester Stallone and the then-popular movie.

However, Spreafico/Eckly's live remake—titled *What a Classic Is and How It Performs in (Our) Time. Paul McCarthy, Rocky, 1976* and presented at the intellectually ambitious Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival—opened with a lecture-performance asking what the current vogue for such remountings might mean for live forms. Does it signal that “performance has lost its power” and that the remakes are “the beginning of the end,” as the artists suggested in their preamble at the opening show? Or does it mean that performance—emerging from the fuzzy margins of other forms (theater, dance, visual arts)—has matured, necessitating that it take the past into account, absorbing it in order to move into the future? Performance makers as different as Vito Acconci, Marina Abramović, and Pina Bausch's company all have longed to see their creations in living repertory—or at least they have sought the capacity to return to past works to propel them to next phases of their work.

The exhibition *Leap before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in autumn 2015, also looked back in order to look forward. (The show will also travel to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles



*Leap before You Look:*  
*Black Mountain*  
*College 1933–1957,*  
 Institute of  
 Contemporary Art,  
 Boston, 2015.  
 Photo: Liza Voll

and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, in 2016 and 2017.) In addition to documenting the school's history with photos, paintings, and other objects, the ICA remounted performances—appropriately, given the importance of the midcentury institute to postwar music and dance.

What was most impressive about the project was not the mere fact of a museum's inclusion of live events in the program mix—standard practice these days—but rather the ICA's calculated move to look at the modernist foundations of contemporary work. Boston, a tech and business hub with a mostly traditional sense of culture, lacks a contemporary art scene with the vitality of, say, Chicago or Los Angeles. Faculty, students, and visiting artists at Black Mountain College defined postwar aesthetics in their non-

hierarchical community. Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg formed a company there, experimenting with sound, light, and movement and with intersections among forms. Presenting local artists and publics in Boston, a university town, about a single school and its historical advances and precedents for interdisciplinary and utopian experimentation makes an insightful curatorial gesture: looking back in order to look forward, and using the institution to place building blocks of cultural knowledge on which artists can build newer, more contemporaneous projects. Perhaps an ambitious exhibition on the Judson Dance Theater and Judson Poets Theater should follow.

These events at a museum made me wonder what theater institutions could do—if they took their programming responsibilities more seriously. Beyond including a new play and a classic, and ensuring a diversity of voices, could the program and choice of modern repertory better serve the playwrights, directors, and ensembles working today? Shouldn't theater audiences encounter technological experiments from the historical avant-gardes so they have a context for digital performance today? Or be presented with (reperformed) iconic queer theater works to make room for the next generation's? What if the key to a sturdy and luminous future actually consists of revisiting the past? On the other hand, the creative visions in this edition's pages demonstrate endless potential for performance in our very uncertain future—and we wouldn't want it any other way.