

Louis Scheeder teaches in the Department of Drama at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU where he is the Director of the Classical Studio. He directed the Broadway musical *Charlie and Algernon* and was the assistant director for the legendary *Carrie*.

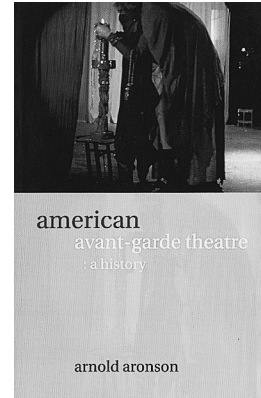
American Avant-Garde Theater: A History. By Arnold Aronson. London and New York: Routledge, 2000; 242 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation. By Nick Kaye. London and New York: Routledge, 2000; 238 pp. \$27.95 paper.

In *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, Arnold Aronson investigates the development of new theatrical ideas and practices, not individual artists' careers. This is the right choice, considering the variety and richness of experimentation in American theatre and visual arts in the second part of the 20th century. However, this methodological approach has its shortcomings: Aronson produces a conventional historiographic narrative, a form often contested and disputed regardless of its subject matter.

Historiographic acceptance of limitations is often justified by the need for clarification of the main subject of investigation. Here, methodological choice is of primary importance: Aronson is not writing the history of *theatrical* avantgarde, but a history of avantgarde *theatre*. Although this distinction may seem laconic, it actually establishes firm boundaries for practices that were marked by great inclusiveness of other arts. This does not mean that other "theatricalities" are completely excluded from this historical account. Action painting, happenings, performance art, body art, Fluxus events, postmodern dance, and experimental film exerted an important, often crucial, influence on avantgarde theatre. All have their place in its history, but according to this account, that place is at the margins. One of Aronson's main concerns is that deeper considerations of these artistic practices not lead to the obfuscation of the main subject. "Marginal" does not necessarily mean "insignificant." Aronson never fails to note the impact that paratheatrical practices exerted on the development of new theatrical aesthetics. For example, he outlines the two "broad categories" that marked the avantgarde in the 1960s: one is the "formalist work" (performance art, Jack Smith, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson) "informed by Happenings, Cagean aesthetics, and influences from other arts"; and the other is "an Artaudian search for a nonliterary theatre and a nonverbal means of communication" (Living Theatre, Open Theatre, The Performance Group) (79). This division into two broad "branches" is not limited only to the 1960s: to a large extent, it informs the totality of Aronson's history. According to this schema, the traces of the two avantgarde streams are detectable already in the 1950s, they reach full maturation in the frenetically productive 1960s, and extend well into the following decade, with the second, "Artaudian" branch slowly diminishing. This leads to the "decline" of the avantgarde.

In Aronson's *American Avant-Garde Theater: A History*, the richness of the subject matter perfectly corresponds to the vastness of its geographic locale. Aronson attributes the 60-year lag between European and American avantgarde theatre to the absence of the consolidated "high" or "official" culture in the United States prior to the 1950s, especially in the domain of theatre and fine arts (11). American culture was not overwhelmed by an imposing tradition threatening to break the spirit of individualism, easily identifiable with the American frontier spirit. "In a peculiar way, then, 'Americanism' and 'avant-gardism' were one and the same,"



writes Aronson (12). This assumption proposes that like geographic (colonial) conquest, artistic experimentation imagines a limit, however distant, of the unknown it sets out to explore. So, when in the opening of the final chapter Aronson asserts that “just as historian Frederick Jackson Turner had famously declared the closing of the American frontier in 1893, Richard Schechner, in 1981, declared the end of the American avant-garde” (181), it becomes clear that what began as a historical speculation inflates into an overarching metaphor. Historiography displaces historical events it claims to be describing.

Aronson allows that Schechner’s claim “was perhaps a decade early,” asserting that the Wooster Group (together with its “logical heir” Reza Abdoh) was “the last major exponent of the postwar American avantgarde movement” (185). Although he grants the avantgarde another decade of life, Aronson does not question the argument about its death. Schechner’s article “The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde” published in *Performing Arts Journal* (1981) and subsequently in his book *The End of Humansism: Writings on Performance* (1982) was a bold and provocative polemic. It elicited passionate responses from people who identified their work as avantgarde (in the broad sense of the word), and, in the last analysis, it helped the avantgarde to rethink itself and its position under new, postindustrial and postmodern conditions. History can be polemical, but it is not a polemic. Its claim to authority overwhelms all eventual responses, save for one: a new history of the American avantgarde theatre showing greater rigor in investigating its origins, and more humility in considering its practitioners in the aftermath of the NEA affair.¹

Aronson’s argument is based on a dubious premise about the relation between theory and practice in avantgarde theatre. He asserts that, while “throughout most of theatre history, theory almost always followed practice,” in the avantgarde “intellectual idea preceded practice, and the theatre was built upon a theoretical foundation” (20). This premise rests on the rightfully contested notion of the originality of the avantgarde. In this case, it serves to discount both recent theory (“there was a proliferation of academic articles written in dense prose that often failed to find an audience among the practitioners” [200]) and practice (“avantgarde-ness has come to be equated with the quirky, the shocking, or the merely offbeat and unexpected, but, by and large, there is no theoretical underpinning for most of this work” [209]). The strict hierarchy between theory and practice is limited to some avantgarde movements from the first half of the 20th century, while their relation became increasingly more complex precisely with the emergence of the intermedial art practices (new music, happenings, postmodern dance) that emerged in the American avantgarde of the 1950s and 1960s.

An active investigation of a nonhierarchical relation between “theory” and “practice” of performance is one of the most striking aspects of Nick Kaye’s new book *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*. Combined with Kaye’s theoretical considerations of site-specificity is the documentation of the works by artists engaged with the problem of site-specific art. What makes this book unique is the fact that Kaye does not use the artists’ works merely as illustrations of his theoretical examination of site-specificity. In that sense, *Site-Specific Art* is a collaborative project between Nick Kaye and the artistic director of the English art ensemble Forced Entertainment, Tim Etchells; Italian artist Michaelangelo Pistoletto; Clifford McLucas of the Welsh performance group Brith Gof; the London-based performance artist Julian Maynard Smith; and the American Meredith Monk. While Kaye’s theoretical investigations of the notions of space, site, material, framing, and document in relation to site-specificity are informed by the work of a variety of artists—ranging from Duchamp, Cage, and Kaprow, to Krzysztof Wodiczko, Italian *arte povera*, and Vito Acconci—his collaborators’ contributions prove that performance not only follows theory but challenges it,

engages in dialogue with it, and, furthermore, arrives at unique propositions accessible only to its own expressive possibilities.

The uniqueness of performance consists in the simultaneous breakthrough to a new intellectual insight and new bodily experience. The latter is suspect to appropriation by commerce. In her seminal essay “Theater As Shopping,” Elinor Fuchs indicates that such appropriations of environmental theatre (the concept that Aronson very effectively explored in his 1977 *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography*) threaten not only the death of the avantgarde, but “of theatrical art itself.” Writing in the early 1990s, she noted that commercialized environmentalists, “far from dragging the spectator into a transformational imaginative space, [...] drag the space to the spectator. They take me out of the theatre and into the realm of active being, inviting not my surrender but seemingly my mastery, control, and ownership” (1996:139). Kaye insists on the opposite pull in the experiments with site-specificity. He focuses on encounters between performance and site that result in the unsettling of the notions of mastery, control, and, more than anything else, ownership. Drawing on Lefebvre’s distinction between “ideal space which has to do with mental (mathematico-logical) categories” and “real space, which is the space of social practice,” Kaye advances the notion of “restlessness” which “aris[es] in an upsetting of the opposition between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ space” (46). Through examination of various performative practices, from architecture to body art, Kaye establishes restlessness as a category “fundamental to site-specificity itself” (198). He writes:

It is in this restlessness, too, that site-specificity defers to the terms and practices of *performance*, even as it presents in relation to explicitly architectural, sculptural, or object-based modes of work. [This] formal “irresolution” or “uneasy gestalt” implicates the viewer in a process of *locating* the limits of their practice, and so in mapping and producing its sites, precisely in order to expose a place always already being *acted out*. (198)

Kaye never loses sight of his authorial position. At the beginning of his book he draws attention to the analogy between language and space, based on de Certeau’s reading of “‘place’ as an ordered and ordering system realized in ‘spatial practice’” (here “place” is analogous to de Saussure’s *langue*, and “space” to *parole*) (4). Significantly, the artists’ contributions to Kaye’s book are neither purely visual records nor exclusively textual descriptions of performances, but the combination of both. Namely, they constitute maps of performative events. These maps with their “stubborn simultaneity” of geography, are juxtaposed to “sequential succession” of text, “a linear flow of sentential statements bound by the most spatial of earthly constraints, the impossibility of two objects (words) occupying the same precise place (as on a page)” (99).² Kaye’s authorial and editorial strategies implicate and challenge the reader in a way similar to the site-specific art he examines.

I found most invigorating and engaging the sections dedicated to discussion of the architect Bernard Tschumi’s *Le Parc de La Villette*. Tschumi challenges the limitations of architecture, such as the impossibility of two objects to occupy one place, by creating a system of *Folies*, “points of intensity,” a “programmatic madness” (48). *Folie* is based on principles of repetition, variation, and juxtaposition. In reading/walking, the operation of citation/repetition produces the effect of simultaneity: *Folies* “provide focal points for ‘the combination of incompatible activities (the running track passes through the piano bar inside the tropical greenhouse)’” (48). Kaye identifies the site-specificity of *Folies* in their use: “site, *location*, like architecture itself, is always *being produced*, and so is subject to instability, ephemerality, and temporality” (51). Kaye turns his book into a site of reading by constructing discursive *Folies*. To my great delight, the two “points of inten-

sity” upon which I stumbled on my path through the narrative are related to Duchamp’s ready-mades. Like Tschumi’s “architecture against itself,” these textual ready-mades indicate dis-integration of text and incite in the reader an intense awareness of the act of reading.

—*Branislav Jakovljevic*

Notes

1. Several authors engaged in the NEA debate show that cultural patterns established in the 19th century can be of great importance for understanding of the ongoing events. See, for example, Lewis Hyde’s essay “The Children of John Adams: A Historical View of the Fight Over Arts Funding” (1999).
2. This is a passage from Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies*, which Kaye quotes.

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Branislav Jakovljevic is a dramaturg from the former Yugoslavia and is a doctoral student in Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU.