**Tragedia Endogonidia.** Produced and directed by Cristiano Carloni and Stefano Franceschetti; music by Scott Gibbons. Based on performances by Societas Raffaello Sanzio, directed by Romeo Castellucci. Raro Video, 2007. 3 DVD (PAL), 1 CD, and 86-page pamphlet.

**The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio.** By Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, Joe Kelleher, and Nicholas Ridout. London: Routledge, 2007; 304 pp. $150.00 cloth, $35.95 paper.

The bus drops us off in the dusty industrial outskirts of the city, in front of a large warehouse, all tin and rust, far away from the medieval walls and cobbled streets where the Avignon Theatre Festival bustles on. We enter the building to see a group of men in coveralls at work on various pieces of machinery. Dressed in their identical garb, it takes some time to recognize them: that young man had been beaten to a bloody pulp in a marble room yesterday evening, and that old man had silently witnessed the event, dressed in a police uniform. Even the director of yesterday’s performance is there, hammering away on the long girder-like mechanism occupying the center of the workshop. When the machine starts up, attacking the floor as if to invoke its own local earthquake, we recognize it, too, as the remains of a second performance from the week before. Back then a sudden shivering of the stage floor had brought the naked protagonist to her knees amidst a field of snow, while a trio of yeti-like creatures uneasily entered the space; now it is merely an unadorned piece of stage machinery, the unearthed skeleton of the spirit that so recently lived under the boards. We, the audience to those events, have been invited backstage, welcomed behind the curtain to see the theatrical apparatus at work, its haunting images revealed as products of finely tuned instruments and diligent actor-technicians.

On the other side of that curtain, the images of the Tragedia Endogonidia cycle (2002–2004) continue to cast long shadows across the international stage. Created by the Italian experimental theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio, renowned for its distinctive approach to a theatre of image and sensation, the Tragedia Endogonidia cycle pursues an extended rumination on the possibility of staging tragedy in contemporary Europe. The cycle conjoins the tragic drive toward death with a life form that, possessing both gonads (or sexual organs), constantly replicates itself anew—the endogonidic, in biological terms. In performance terms, the cycle spawned 11 interconnected but discrete episodes in 10 different European cities over three years (the first and last episode premiered in Cesena, Italy, the company’s base of operations). Each episode presented a mutated incarnation of the same constellation of images and ideas, becoming itself anew in relation to each host city. For example, the white cube or “marble room of the Law” referenced above belongs to the Brussels episode, entitled Brussels B.#04, reflecting the city’s role as administrative heart of the European Union. As director Romeo Castellucci
describes the cycle’s process: “It is not a finished show that is moved from city to city. Its moving
around is the show; a rhythm that strikes; a transformed organism, like the different phases
in the life of an animal or vegetable” (29). In other words, this is a theatre that attends to the
“passing moment” not so much in terms of its loss or disappearance, but as an organism’s move
elsewhere, a step aside or a perversion; the performance becomes other than itself.

This concern with performing what, in one of the accompanying dramaturgical notes,
Castellucci calls “an organism on the run” carries over into the question of documentation and
the afterlife of the work (*The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio* 32). As one of a series of shorter
site-specific pieces, or *Crescita* (“tendrils”), created as outgrowths of the cycle’s episodes during
its lifetime, the warehouse performance described above displays one such passage off the stage.
If each *Crescita* follows a particular image or character from the larger episodes into another,
more isolated, situation, in this case it traces the origins of the theatrical event alongside its
remains. This past year saw the release of two works that stage a further transmutation of the
*Tragedia Endogonidia* performance cycle into textual and video media. It would be a misnomer
to call either “documentation” as long as such a term implied an archival authority. Instead, they
come to us as further spores off the original “organism,” as diverging, but exemplary, models for
staging the remains of a living performance.

Both the book and the DVD represent significant landmarks for the company. While
Castellucci has produced discrete video installations for gallery display and for the company’s
private archive, the video incarnation of the cycle stands as the first publicly released filmic
record of the group’s performances. On the other hand, *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*
is the first monograph published in English on the internationally acclaimed company and thus
represents a long-awaited introduction to a body of work at the forefront of contemporary
experimental performance. It is also the most circumspect consideration available in any
language of both the *Tragedia Endogonidia* cycle as well as the working process of the Societas
Raffaello Sanzio as a whole.

With the “video memory” of the *Tragedia Endogonidia* cycle, directed and produced by
Italian video artists Cristiano Carloni and Stefano Franceschetti, and released in a boxed set
by Raro Video, we have a document that performs its technological capture in the organic
terms of human memory. The two artists have previously created video projections for sections
of Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s projects, so their formal approach to the representation of the
performance is clearly informed by the theoretical foundations laid out by the company. They
translate the pressure of time, so specific to Castellucci’s oeuvre, into a distended and scratched
video image, as if it, too, were just recently excavated from the ruins of an ancient city, some
long lost and now defaced temple to European History.

The video memory offers audiences a survey of the entire cycle in a single sitting—a
comprehensive view that the peripatetic live performance strictly denies—while still presenting
itself as an outgrowth of the system that it oversees. If the *Tragedia Endogonidia* interrogates the
ontology of the (tragic) theatre, then the video memory couples such reflexivity with an
investigation of its own means of representation. The filmed cycle is not documentation that
disguises its role as mediator of the event, but instead indexes the interventions of the camera
in the midst of the theatrical performance. We see impossible close-ups and angles of attention:
a foot fills the screen, a face in profile, the camera even turning to look back at the theatre
audience itself. While many of the episodes obscure the onstage action with screens and scrims,
curtains and windows, thereby materially staging the spectator’s struggle with the responsibility
of witnessing, Carloni and Franceschetti present both sides of the occurrence: the gaze of the
spectator from outside the stage world, and the gaze from within. In an interview with Carloni
and Franceschetti printed in the accompanying pamphlet, the artists state: “Structurally speak-
ing, the videographs of the episodes are all pervaded by a view which aims to nullify the inter-
pretation of a director and identify with the point of view of a ghost” (DVD 74). The spirit of
the camera haunts the video, superimposing its own frame upon that of the proscenium theatre.
However, this explicit appearance of the camera's apparatus does not seek to filter or distance the encounter, but maintains its focus upon the position of the spectator. Like the live performances, the video incarnation keeps the spectator squarely within its attention, staked to the event's unfolding.

The experience of watching the live performances thus finds its complement in a filmic vocabulary. Carlioni and Franceschetti fracture linear temporality into stutters and starts, cutting forward in time and back, stretching out into slow motion the gesticulations of a masked woman (Cesena C.#01) or accelerating a goose-stepping trio of policemen ever closer to the Chaplinesque (Paris P.#06). The 11 hour-long episodes become 20-or 30-minute-long glimpses into an absent whole. As such, the video memory takes seriously the claims of philosophers of process, such as Henri Bergson and Alfred Whitehead, that temporality does not operate in a uniform and measurable manner but is entirely elastic and malleable. In the same move, the video transposes the cycle into the register of memory, into our own rearrangements of experience after the fact.

The beautifully presented boxed set includes a short pamphlet in English, French, and Italian that introduces the larger project and features production photographs by Luca del Pia; three DVDs contain the full video cycle. An additional CD contains a number of sound pieces from the cycle by Scott Gibbons, the Chicago-based sound artist who has worked with the company for the past decade. Gibbons composed the sound score for the Tragedia Endogonidia in collaboration with company member Chiara Guidi and the CD included provides longer versions of some of the soundscapes from the 11 episodes. The base material for all this work derives from Guidi's investigations into the human voice, here twisted and folded through Gibbons's digital manipulation into a montage that weaves familiar soundings with sensations at the cusp of the audible, more felt than heard. Combined with live manipulations of onstage sounds from microphones implanted in the police truncheons used to beat an unclothed man or that catch the whisper of a flag unfurling in the air, these sonic forces act as physical gestures pressing against and literally inhabiting the body of the audience. In a letter to Gibbons reprinted in The Theatre of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, Guidi writes of melding the organic and the machinic to give voice to otherwise inaudible forces: to “time, to pressure and gravitation, to attraction and repulsion, to dilation, contraction, cracking, stretching and straining” (27). In other words, Gibbons's sounds capture or express the forces that course through the organs of the theatre. In Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio’s theatre of the sensorium, they impose a presence as necessary to the mise-en-scène as the visual landscape.

If the video memory thrusts the viewer directly into the midst of the stage world, even crossing the bounds of the proscenium frame, then the book The Theatre of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio takes a more circumspect overview of the entire process of creation and reception. The genetic tie between the performance and its textual incarnation is reinforced by the fact that company founders Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, and Chiara Guidi stand as coauthors alongside critic-spectators Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout. The largest section of the book approaches each of the cycle's 11 episodes from a myriad of perspectives. Theoretical essays by members of the company, letters exchanged in the midst of the creative process, descriptive scores for the event, and evocative responses by the spectators Kelleher and Ridout together carve out the time and space surrounding the missing performance. The material exposes the structural and theoretical choices that inspire the action onstage and, in the writings of Kelleher and Ridout, the affective consequences of such action on the spectator. A series of conversations about the working process and theories of performance comprise the remainder of the book, including discussions devoted to “space, stage, and audience,” “dramaturgy,” “pretence and illusion,” “composition,” “rehearsal,” “gesture,” and “the future.”

At the end of the book, several pages from Castellucci’s working notebooks are reprinted without comment—the raw material of images and ideas that may later form the basis for future projects. Some have found their way into the Tragedia episodes or the subsequent production
Hey Girl!, but most remain unrealized. The phrases read like koans or thresholds to impossible worlds: “A geometry of smoke in front of a dark red wall”; “An army of little miniaturized men who silently invade the stage and take it over”; “A big black cloth falls unexpectedly to fill the whole frame of the stage, spontaneously cutting through the representation. Written on it in white: STORY. There is just time to read it. Then darkness” (263–69). Here and throughout the book the prose is nothing short of profound, replete with striking images and aphoristic turns of phrase that extend far beyond the immediate concerns of the work at hand and suggest a comprehensive vision for the future of performance both within the theatre and without.

In other words, this is not only a book about the germination of the cycle and the concomitant growth of the company, it is also a book about theatremaking as such. From their inception the company has taken up the Artaudian project of staging an escape from representation by creating performances that play against the nerves of the spectator, a theatre of internal affects. Cognizant of the paradox of attempting such a venture in the house of the theatre, they have spent the last 25 years exploring a “theatre of iconoclasm” that uses the means of the theatre in order to contradict or excavate its representations (see Castellucci 2001). The Societas Raffaello Sanzio have been variously celebrated and accused of pursuing the surreal image towards merely shocking or interesting ends. However, in one of the conversations included here, Castellucci warns that “there is a great difference between a surreal image and an enigmatic image. In the enigma, there is always a system, like a bomb that needs defusing, although there is a logic to it” (255). It is this submerged logic that discloses itself to the reader over the course of the book, a system of thought that draws together disparate strands of visual, theatrical, philosophical, and cultural history into a complex living thought. The knotted images and events of the Tragedia Endogonidia that may initially shock without apparent reason thus unfold into a multifarious investigation into the nature of representation, an embodied experiment with the material of theatre itself.

Finally, this is a book about the nature of spectatorship, the burden of witnessing an event at the beginning of the 21st century. In the last conversation included in the collection, the one devoted to “the future” of the company’s work and the horizon of artistic and temporal possibility to come, Castellucci says: “For me, the future of the theatre is that of the spectator” (259). The spectator is the protagonist of the event, her body the stage upon which images and sensations act. Such a theatre presents significant obstacles to the task of documentation. The avoidance of explicit and detailed description that would so readily kill the piece itself presents a dilemma for the reader less familiar with the company’s work. Numerous moments from the cycle are referenced throughout the text, but even with Luca Del Pia’s lustrous production photographs as indexes to select images, the logic of the company’s iconoclastic theatricality deliberately exceeds the bounds of the book. And in spite of Kelleher and Ridout’s impressive and moving responses to the work, the actuality of the stage experience will at times escape even the most attentive readers. It seems quite clear that these are intentional limits to the book, a resistance to the will-to-power associated with the archival impulse, but such instances of pointed absence also signal the value of setting the text against its video counterpart.

Addressing this matter directly in their introduction to the book, Kelleher and Ridout discuss the company’s practice of including the future remains of a work in its very making: “The afterlife of the work […] is already to be built in, as it were, to the life of the work. But then to call it a life, and to conceive this life as a life that remains, is also to conceive a mutation, beyond the will or craft of the maker” (6). Both of these memorial efforts, then, show us what such an “afterlife of the work” might look like and perhaps suggest a model for thinking of performative remains as contained within, and transformed beyond, the will of the maker as creator and as critic.

The workers leave for their lunch break, but the old man stays behind to eat his lunch alone. We follow as he makes his way to the rear of the warehouse, beyond walls and walls of packing crates to face an alcove of sorts. There stands the perfect white cube, another remnant from a previous performance in the cycle. When we last saw it, the chamber had been set within a black
box theatre, a brilliant white room with no entrance or exit apart from the “invisible” fourth wall—the quintessential box set—but here in the workshop, its unpainted plywood sides left visible, it is a decidedly mundane set piece. Yet something is awry in this Brechtian paradise, the illusion of backstage practicality suddenly punctured. For there, pinned high to the white wall of the chamber, is a boy in a loincloth, martyred like some arrowless Saint Sebastian and utterly drenched in a pitch black liquid. We watch as the old man unceremoniously heaves a plastic pail high to throw more of the black substance on the writhing boy, spattering the pristine walls with the viscous ooze. The stage life of the Tragedia Endogonidia cycle, its mythic weight, has folded over into the backstage space, into the most mundane means of theatrical production. The organism runs on, past the walls of the theatre, out into this industrial no-man’s-land, through book, video, and beyond.

—Daniel Sack

Reference

Castellucci, Claudia, and Romeo Castellucci

Daniel Sack is a PhD candidate in the Department of Drama at Stanford University. His writings on the Societas Raffaello Sanzio have appeared in Theatre Journal and Yale’s Theater.

TDR: The Drama Review 53:1 (T201) Spring 2009. ©2009 New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology


During the week that I read Joseph Roach’s discerning and erudite account of the phenomenon known as “It,” Carla Bruni, aka Madame Sarkozy, was visiting Britain. The former model was photographed in the tabloids nude at 15; she was compared in the “posh” papers, such as the Times and the Guardian, to Jackie Kennedy and Princess Di. Her clothes were discussed in great detail as was every gesture and turn of her pretty head. Surely, Carla Bruni Sarkozy has It. It seemed a fitting coincidence, since Roach’s book begins with his personal sighting of Uma Thurman on the cover of GQ while in the barber’s chair, and continues with his musing on her “countenance, the effortless look of public intimacy well known in actresses and models, but also common among high-visibility professionals of other kinds, [...] one part, albeit an important one, of the multifaceted genius of It” (3).

Yet this book is really the achievement of a performance scholar who is most emphatically a theatre historian, and Roach spends most of his time on the late 17th and 18th centuries, the period of the Stuart Restoration. He is interested in the way the public intimacy associated with It came into sharp relief during the reign of Charles II, when the King and the crop of new actresses on the Restoration stages brought the concept into focus, and then moved right down through the centuries into Hollywood and Clara Bow, eponymous It girl, by the 1920s. Although the book’s pages are mostly occupied with the icons of the earlier era— their accessories, clothes, hair, skin, flesh, and bones (titles of the chapters)—it extends into the present, to Princess Di and even Margaret Thatcher in a sleight of hand/mind that proclaims: “The deep eighteenth century is the one that isn’t over yet” (13).
The key device for this elastic approach is Roach’s discovery and deployment of Elinor Glyn, who established the meaning of “It” in her novel of that name (1927). Elinor and her sister Lucile were born middle-class Victorians, but according to Roach, had the temperament of Edwardian “new women” who had moved from England to Hollywood. Lucile was a dressmaker who created “emotion dresses” for beautiful women, including costumes for Florenz Ziegfeld, while Elinor worked for Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer writing novels and screenplays, and teaching actress-icons such as Clara Bow how to behave and succeed—a little like Professor Higgins remade Eliza (the main subject of the chapter on flesh, Pygmalionism, is a key concept throughout). Glyn’s prescient analysis joined the past to the present in the moment of the rise of the movie star:

Refracting the light of Hollywood star power through the peculiar lens of her romantic and archly royalist understanding of English history and culture, Glyn interpreted modern celebrity as a survival or prolonged revival of what she called the “ancien régime,” which for her represented a return of the enchanted and enchanting “noblesse oblige” of monarchy, particularly that of the Stuarts, and above all that of Charles II, her favorite king. (22)

Roach points out the affinity between Glyn and Samuel Pepys, whose diaries Glyn read and loved, and who was also an ambitious and active figure on the sidelines of celebrity and power in his time. Roach looks at Pepys’s “awareness of the rise of synthetic experience” (26), which made him an excellent precursor to Glyn and guide to It at the court and in the theatres of the Restoration era.

Readers will recognize the extension of Roach’s brilliant circum-Atlantic study, Cities of the Dead (1996), in the conceptual categories of this book. Surrogacy, effigy, and the kinesthetic imagination—the key terms that evoked the embodied transpositions of the human being in movement toward both death and preservation in cultural memory—are extended here into a vocabulary that seeks to define the afterimage of celebrity, the charismata and stigmata of strength and vulnerability that mark such creatures, and the synecdochical effervescence that characterizes a spiritually marked reception of them. This book meditates on enchantment and the desire to touch “a spectre more ragtag than any saintly relic: assorted features and body parts, bits of clothes and accessories, briefly glimpsed gestures and expressions” (44). At the same time, as with the previous book, it is also deeply concerned with the decay and death that are inextricably woven into the texture of It: “She looks great. Isn’t she dead by now?” (36).

Each of the chapters that follow this introduction consider some of the bits and pieces in terms of these thematics. Writing on accessories, Roach considers not only the fan and the sword, but also the funeral effigy of Charles II and mortuary portraiture of the period. In “Clothes,” the portraiture exhibiting the classic dishabille is seen as part of the delicate balance between availability and mystery, the ethereal and carnal that marks It. We find not only women’s clothes, for not only women have It of course, but also an extended discussion of the dressing habits and costs of the Duke of Buckingham, quintessential rake of his time, ending in Augustus Egg’s “The Death of Buckingham,” with its resonance to Hogarth’s Bedlam scene in “A Rake’s Progress”: “Before, clothes make the man; after, they unmake him […] the yellow light of day cruelly exposes the tattered garments stripped from the wasted body of the prodigal, whose blue velvet Garter and George now mock his ignoble demise” (104).

In the chapter on “Hair,” the capacity of hair to mark a range of social stations, occupations, and styles gives new meaning to the term “big hair” as a detailed analysis of the periwig gives way to the helmet-like coiffure of Margaret Thatcher. Chapter 4 on “Skin” focuses on the tragedy queens, from Ann Bracegirdle and Sarah Siddons to Princess Di, to show how racialized depictions of their luminescence not only configured their racial whiteness but also their spiritual character, combined in paintings of the age to refer to religious iconography and classical sculpture. Always attentive to the dark side of It, Roach comments, “Each tragedy
queen was adored in her own time, and each was, like Diana, Princess of Wales in hers, despised and stalked as well as venerated” (148).

The discussion of “Flesh” in chapter 5 takes place against the background of Covent Garden, where traffic in gifts and commodities extended to young girls, and pits the fate of the tragedy queens against the dark side of Covent Garden’s “flower girls.” Flesh is positioned between two extreme values, the priceless and the worthless, and it is the speed of treacherous descent of the one into the other that is most remarked here. This chapter, with its reconsideration of the Pygmalion myth via Shaw and My Fair Lady reminds us that the term of endearment “little cabbage” also evokes Covent Garden’s daily metamorphoses: “Whereas the morning tide of market-fresh succulents rolled in on carts from the countryside, the afternoon leftovers were tossed in the gutters to rot” (194).

“Bone,” the last chapter, turns to pirates and those dangerous figures of romance and intrigue that reach from Mac the Knife to Johnny Depp’s Captain Jack Sparrow. The erotic charge of their afterimages makes a fitting climax to this book, because the skull and crossbones also leaves its afterimage, which has been Roach’s abiding thematic. After excellent readings of Peter Pan, The Beggar’s Opera, and The Threepenny Opera, Roach ends with another funeral effigy, a carved remnant of Katherine of Valois (who died in 1437), Henry V’s queen, and an excellent sum-up for his tapestry of It:

Onstage in effigy, Katherine becomes the ventriloquized object of synthetic experience, refleshed at intervals by actresses from Mary Betterton to Emma Thompson, as in life her body, like Diana’s, became the reusable vehicle of dynastic succession. (230)

The book conjures It, displays and analyses It, yet also produces for its readers the synthetic experience of “It’s” effervescence.

On the day I finished reading It, I happened to have tickets to Howard Brenton’s new play about Harold Macmillan at the National Theatre, Never So Good. In the first act, Harold’s mother admonishes and derides him as a young man for not having It, and tells him he will never rise to great things without It. He internalizes her critique and aspires, against his nature, to It. Brenton’s sympathetic portrait of Macmillan’s years as Prime Minister deeply engages with Roach’s thematics, in a splendid and timely coincidence—although perhaps not such a coincidence since Macmillan’s mother came from the generation that knew Elinor Glyn’s novels and screenplays, and most likely had a very clear notion of It.

—Janelle Reinelt

Reference
Roach, Joseph

Janelle Reinelt is Professor of Theatre and Performance at University of Warwick in the UK. She was President of the International Federation for Theatre Research (2004–2007) and former Vice President for Research and Publications of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). She is also a former Editor of Theatre Journal. Her books include After Brecht: British Epic Theater (University of Michigan Press, 1994), Critical Theory and Performance, 2nd ed. with Joseph Roach (University of Michigan Press, 2007), The Performance of Power with Sue-Ellen Case (University of Iowa Press, 1991), and The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights with Elaine Aston (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The Wooster Group Work Book. By Andrew Quick. London: Routledge, 2007; 287 pp.; with photographs by Paula Court and Mary Gearhart. $140.00 cloth; $38.00 paper.

The Wooster Group Work Book is the product of a collaboration between the Wooster Group and Andrew Quick, Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at Lancaster University and founding member of the Leeds-based performance company named imitating the dog. Quick’s double capacity as critic and creative artist suited him well for a project that made him spend weeks on end talking to company members, watching rehearsal videos, and delving through journals, actors’ notes, production drawings, and assorted scripts and transcripts.

The result is a superb sourcebook, partaking in the widespread archival trend. As such, the Work Book illustrates how many performance artists are increasingly committed to securing their place in theatre history not just by preventing precious material from being lost, but also by actively intervening in the critical field. While the Wooster Group have always been aware of the need to retain control in the face of misrepresentations and appropriations, the sourcebook marks a relative change, already noticeable in the improved upkeep of their online archive, which years ago tended to be less rigorously maintained. It is a relative change, because documentation has long been an integral part of the company’s performance project, beginning with Rumstick Road (1977), which probed the death of Spalding Gray’s mother through family pictures, audiotaped conversations, as well as the actor’s living memory and bodily presence. With the advent of video technology new means became available to keep tabs on creative work, rendered all the more useful when the absence of performers called for substitutes. The creative function of the documentation is also obvious in the extensive text revisions the book includes, revealing the processual quality of the Wooster Group’s work, which began more than 30 years ago.

Given the longevity of the company, it is all the more surprising that to date only two published monographs exist. David Savran’s Breaking the Rules (1988) balances interviews with exegesis, adding rehearsal and production shots, and drawings of the evolving ground plans. My own volume, The Wooster Group and Its Traditions (2004), combines a photographic portfolio and discussion between Philip Auslander and Willem Dafoe with formal essays by diverse scholars. Andrew Quick presents the primary material in a fairly straightforward manner with minimal captions, but frames it with introductory and concluding essays, plus interspersed interviews with LeCompte and/or Kate Valk. Other company members are quoted throughout, in keeping with their shared roles as purveyors of ideas and materials. To those authorial agents Quick adds the Performing Garage, whose availability as home and working space has left its indelible “footprint” on the company’s working methods and output.

Out of practical necessity, five productions were selected for documentation—Frank Dell’s The Temptation of St. Antony (1986), Brace Up! (1990), Fish Story (1993), House/Lights (1997), and To You, The Birdie! (2001). Quick has excluded the extensively revised North Atlantic (1984) as well as O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape (1998) and The Emperor Jones (1995) from the period covered, which to him “felt like the most logical form of omission” (11), a motivation that begs the question. References to these three productions compensate for their absence, and Quick’s judgments and vocabulary are informed by a thorough knowledge of the Group’s entire oeuvre. The volume is rounded out with a select bibliography, a chronology extending the coverage till 2006, the credits for the five productions discussed, and a short index, perhaps too short to be very useful. The same applies to the bibliography, which omits for example Susan Letzler Cole’s valuable documentation of Frank Dell from her Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World (1992) and the references to some of the primary sources used by the Wooster Group, which would be useful for further research.
Quick’s minimalist commentary forces the book’s users to confront and come to terms with the materials. Due to the fragmentary nature of the book, it is at times difficult to decipher the evidence so that interpretation has to be suspended until more information can be gathered from the interviews and critical essays. Hopefully, in the course of this ongoing dialogue between sources and commentary, the productions will come to life again rather than be consecrated and fixed by authorized views. Quick realizes that his focus on the “pragmatics” of thetremaking and problem solving may be construed as a recoil from “meaning and context” (269). Short of rehearsing arguments in favor of professional theatre practice as research or restating the importance for the avantgarde of reclaiming everyday practice from the ideological forces that weigh down on it, Quick defers to the artist’s right to steer clear of interpreting her own work and to LeCompte’s own insistence on “making” and “doing.” Whether this inaugurates a new approach to the Wooster Group’s work remains to be seen, since the ethics of listening that he develops—valuable as these ethics may be in times of individualism, informational overkill, and quick consumerism—rather seem to align his own practical method of relying on interviews and careful perusal of the materials at his disposal with the Wooster Group’s rehearsal mode, covering the private process of making as well as the public one of presenting their work.

In light of the company’s destabilizations of domestic and theatrical space as sites for identity construction, overarching issues like the postmodern “displacement of selfhood” are acknowledged only to be dismissed as a “convenient thematic” in favor of a “less iconoclastic and more affirmative” insistence on the direct confrontation with the material and “presentations that resist being folded back into meaning” (270). All too often, Quick adds, this confrontation has been deemed aggressive, but like directorial constraints keeping the performers on edge, it prevents the productions from settling or solidifying into actorly routines and critical preconceptions. The usedness of the materials, dragging in their wake a living history complementing that of the company, should also forestall formalism and a gratuitous or hermetic postmodern play. Ultimately, the invitation to abandon oneself to experience is extended from the performers to the spectators. For this reason, Quick had to refrain from too much interpretation to safeguard the materials for future use. And lest there be any doubt, this treasure trove of a book is certain to become a major research tool in years to come.

—Johan Callens

References

Callens, Johan

Cole, Susan Letzler

Savran, David

Johan Callens teaches at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and has recently published Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard (P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2007).

Jacques Rancière rose to prominence in the English-speaking art world in 2004 with the translation of his pamphlet The Politics of Aesthetics. The Future of the Image is his latest book to appear in English, having originally been published in France in 2003. A significant aspect of Rancière’s appeal has been his ability to engage with contemporary art, and in this sense the title of the book is potentially misleading. Those expecting Rancière to follow his articles and reviews from the biennial circuit with a book-length treatment on the trajectories of the global art scene will be disappointed. With the exception of some passages in the first chapter, Godard is one of the few living artists to be discussed substantially and those referenced are mostly from the modernist canon: figures like Mallarmé, Duchamp, and Flaubert.

The book consists of five more or less separate essays originally presented or published elsewhere between 2001 and 2002 but revised for the book. The first four can be very loosely classified as addressing photography, cinema, painting, and design respectively, but doing so would entail ignoring Rancière’s attempt to undermine all claims for the purity of genres. Rather, he stresses the relationships between forms, the porous nature of their borders, and the ambiguity and interchangeability of their defining characteristics. In particular, there is a focus throughout on the complex relationships between the visual arts and language. This covers everything from Godard’s juxtaposition of film clips and narration from Histoire(s) du cinema (1988–1998), the interaction between a Francis Bacon painting and Deleuze’s book on Bacon, and the similarities between a Mallarmé poem and German Werkbund-era industrial design. The final essay, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?” engages this very question—posed in different ways by thinkers like Kant, Adorno, and Lyotard—through a conceptual apparatus and argument in common with each of the previous four essays.

As the title suggests, the book’s driving question is the nature of the image. It is impossible to provide a simple definition here since much of Rancière’s project is about mapping different conceptions of the image under different regimes of the arts, primarily those of what he terms the representative and the aesthetic regimes. These regimes are not simply historical epochs but philosophical stances, viewpoints, specific “distributions of the sensible” that inform aesthetic practice and discourse, literally structuring what can be said, thought, or created. Images, according to Rancière, are not simply frozen representations of reality, but operations. Nor are they limited to the visual, as Rancière reminds us: “The visible can be arranged in meaningful tropes; words deploy a visibility that can be blinding” (7). The book’s guiding hypothesis is that negotiating the many functions, meanings, and conceptions of the term “image” precisely constitutes the labor of art (1). One of the most important of the several concepts introduced is that of the sentence-image. The sentence-image is not simply a combination of verbal sequence and visual form: “The sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image” (46). Rancière claims that this draws from the concept and practice of montage, but that it is a montage that must keep a core of conflict or mystery, unlike contemporary advertising for example, which might create a montage coupling happiness and cola. The elements that make up the sentence-image cannot completely blend into each other: an uncoupled coupling (59).

After making some preliminary remarks on his notion of image early in the first essay Rancière writes, “It might seem superfluous to recall such simple things. But if it is necessary to do so, it is because these simple things are forever being blurred” (7). The most gratifying aspect of Rancière’s approach, and this could be generalized to cover much of his oeuvre, is
that he doesn’t just show how these simple things are being shrouded by those of us without PhDs in philosophy, but by the theorists themselves. In *The Future of the Image* Rancière grapples with the canon of aesthetic theory to demonstrate that it is often misunderstandings about the nature of the artistic regime we live within that account for a myriad of distortions about art’s role, responsibility, and capacity. In the end it is a positive that Rancière does not tell us where the image is going. Why should he? The art world does not need another philosopher-prophet—the legions of trend-spotters let us know what is coming and where we should invest, regardless. Rancière’s work consistently refuses to create stultifying schemas to reign in what is thinkable, or in this case, imaginable.

—Jeff Kinkle

Reference
Rancière, Jacques

Jeff Kinkle is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London, writing on Guy Debord, conspiracy theory, and state terror. He is a member of the Site Magazine editorial board and the art-collective Sakerna, both based in Stockholm, Sweden.


Darby English’s *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* executes several brilliant, rigorous, and at times arduous moves to read the work of five contemporary artists whose works actively push against critical efforts to read “black art” as representative of a laboriously constructed “black experience.” The artists are Kara Walker, Fred Wilson, Isaac Julien, Glen Ligon, and William Pope.I., artists whose works are both framed by and occasioned by their viewing contexts: site-specific, durational, and deeply invested in the embodied experience of encountering objects, images, and live performance. Each of them revises the presumed profile of the artist as representative of a generalized community. English’s project intends to counter the “exercises of power” (26) that would secure work by a “black artist” to a regimented institution called “black art,” itself tethered to the construction of an internally coherent “black community.” The disciplinary and ideological linkages that English sets out to disarticulate, or at least to denaturalize, are historicized in his first chapter. Here, English reaches from the first invocations of the category “black art” in the early 20th century debate between Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois, to contemporary critical reiterations of “black representational space,” finally engaging the psychoanalytic work of Frantz Fanon for the ways that it both describes blackness as an effect of imaging, and produces blackness as an ambivalently lived category that one may need to “creatively decline” (44). Thus before English can get to the focused readings he offers in the chapters that follow, he traces the way blackness as a discursive category both produces limits for representation and constitutes a productive “problem” of representation. There is courage driving this project, and the desire to ask what new ways of seeing are engendered when we “shift our orientation and understanding away from
the black artist’s presumed, peculiar representational duties” (67) toward the creative possibilities art offers, especially for understanding processes of identification that are eclectic, contradictory, and contingent.

Importantly, in English’s hands to ask the above question is not to cease investigating how images operate to produce and maintain what and how racial difference means, but rather to see how attending to the work itself can have much broader, dispersed, and implicating consequences for understanding imaging and visuality. In this vein he engages the work of Kara Walker through a comparison with 19th-century American landscape painting, and in this he soars, deftly showing how Walker’s large-scale silhouettes unfix several orienting points for national identity and history. In the next chapter, English contrasts an exhibit by Fred Wilson with a film by Isaac Julien, each negotiating the life (and anti-life) functions of the museum as an institutional presence in the city of Baltimore. Here, English displays how the demands of standing in for a presumed community presence, in the case of Wilson, create constraints that the work of Julien’s film, keyed to desire, fantasy, and subjectivity, helps to explode. Glen Ligon’s text-saturated paintings are pried for their challenge to “imaging consciousness,” and English convincingly shows the insufficiency of approaching Ligon’s paintings along the either/or binary of language or abstraction. Instead, they execute “interpenetrations of typically distinct domains” (249), an effect that English suggests has everything to do with the embodied gaze of the viewing encounter. The book closes with William Pope.L, particularly his crawl performances, and the ways that they present an aesthetics (and a politics) of “dispossession,” in which Pope.L’s “performance of self” (266) lays bare the provisional, dangerous, and other-ing process of embodying “identity.”

In English’s account, dislocation and spatialization have up to this point operated as conceptual terms for describing the disarticulating effects of the art at hand. Perhaps because of the site-specificity of Pope.L’s practice, or perhaps because this is the only example that deals with a live body visualized as art object, space here is returned to a certain ground: the specific histories of the area of New York that the crawls criss-cross and the specific relation between Pope.L’s aesthetics of dispossession and his own family history. It is an interesting moment in the account particularly for those of us most accustomed to thinking about live bodies and art, for in all the chapters English describes viewing and “reading” objects as a performance, as durational and of a situation. Performance as a critical reading practice helps answer the pedagogical gesture implied by the book’s title, but in this final section, when what is dealt with is (more literally) a performance, some of the terms that had been marvelously unfixed in the preceding chapters return in an oddly stable form. In general, the exclusion of performance vocabularies (English reaches for British cultural studies models more) is at times surprising, and it is likely that these would have been especially invigorating to his discussion of viewing Julien’s film and Ligon’s paintings. Despite this, the book offers an urgent and welcome intervention into modes of thinking representation and identity in visual art. It opens a discomfiting and very valuable gap between “identity politics” and formalist readings, offering up a mode of viewing that productively unsettles both camps.

—M. G. Renu Cappelli

M. G. Renu Cappelli is a post-doctoral fellow in the humanities at Stanford University. She holds a PhD in performance studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research explores interventions into normative models of identity, focusing in particular on how desire, resistance, and trauma stage and interrogate racial formations and sexual subjectivities. Her current book project is “Inadmissible Presence: Objecthood, Spectacle, and the Theatricality of Race,” on the work of Suzan-Lori Parks, Kara Walker, and William Pope.L.

Rudolf Laban’s life does not easily submit itself to the demands of biography. The almost overwhelming volume and variety of his artistic, professional, and romantic pursuits, not to mention the overarching grandiosity of his vision, resist linear narrative and thematic structure. Evelyn Doerr’s admirable attempt, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, provides an impressively thorough description of Laban’s life and work from his childhood in turn-of-the-century Bratislava through his death in the UK in 1958. Meticulously researched and annotated, this account offers readers detailed information about every facet of Laban’s life and work in chronologically ordered chapters. While much writing on Laban tends to overlook his artistic achievements in favor of his theoretical work, Doerr writes extensively about his choreography, going so far as to include an elaborate year-by-year listing of individual works in the appendix. The scope and depth of this information will be useful to those studying Laban, who will no doubt be able to sample relevant selections and discover new and fascinating facts about their subject. However, because of the sheer quantity of these facts and because they are all presented with equal emphasis, the book is slow going for those who might wish to read it from start to finish.

The “Prologue” imagines Laban on 1 August 1936 secretly watching Mary Wigman’s choreography for the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games in Berlin. In Doerr’s daydream, Laban somewhat bitterly muses about his own rejected choreography for the program (a piece here translated as “Of the Thaw Wind and the New Joy”) and then, as “Ode to Joy” blares from the amphitheatre loudspeakers, renews his sense of hope and commitment to dance. It’s a lovely image, but I would have much preferred an introductory chapter laying out Doerr’s concerns, arguments, or thematic considerations. While Doerr offers up minutia such as the menu at a sanatorium at which Laban stayed in 1912 (oatmeal, pumpernickel, hazelnuts, and honey, among other items), she doesn’t give us much in the way of interpretation or analysis. The chapters are divided into short subsections with titles like “Laban Falls in Love,” “No Dada Soireés without Laban Ladies,” and “The Fulfillment of a Dream,” which can seem to trivialize the material. Originally published in German in 2005, the writing in this edition feels stilted, perhaps because three different translators (including Doerr herself) worked on the project. In addition to the odd subchapter headings, awkward sentences like, “The Tietjen-Reinhardt-Project was meant to bring a fresh wind into a theater life lamed by the worldwide economic crisis” (148) further jolt the reader out of engagement with the narrative.

There are many rich tidbits about Laban’s personal life—for instance, his reliance on women, not least his mother, for economic as well as intellectual support—and important explanations of the development of his work. Doerr’s description of the evolution of Labanotation (a term coined not by Laban himself but by Ann Hutchinson Guest) is especially edifying. However, because of the information overload and the absence of a clear focus, one misses a sense of Laban’s position within dance and movement studies and the arts more broadly. Laban interacted with an amazing array of the most important artists of his time, including Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke, Isadora Duncan, and many of the Dadaists, and his work has influenced fields from theatre to sport to ergonomics to psychotherapy. But Doerr presents Laban in a quasi-mystical light that deflects historical and cultural contexts.

However, Doerr does delve into critical issues in one section that focuses on Laban’s involvement with National Socialism in the years leading up to WWII. This is a controversial topic, and in the past students of Laban’s system of movement analysis (myself among them) were told a comforting story of Laban fleeing the Nazis, as did so many of his colleagues. The
truth, of course, is quite a bit more complicated and damning, and Doerr is willing to confront Laban’s compliance, if not his complicity. She notes evidence of Laban’s “fundamental agreement with the racial policy of the Nazis” (159), but also asserts that: “The choreographer, like many others, was enthusiastic about Nazi policy without realizing the consequences that had already followed from it—and those that were still to come” (159). Doerr is refreshingly clear about Laban’s alignment with many Nazi ideals and his direct participation in the regime through his work for Goebbels’ Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, but defends his actions as naive rather than immoral. At the end of the book, in a section called “Crime and Punishment,” Doerr rebuts Lilian Karina and Marion Kant’s essential 1996 book Hitler’s Dancers (translated into English in 2003), which includes Laban among those referred to by the title. Doerr accuses Karina and Kant of failing to look at “the contradictions in his character and at their development” (207). Although Doerr’s book does not succeed as an apologia, her desire to shade the condemnation of Laban is important to the ongoing reexamination of his relationship to the Reich.

—Jessica Berson

Reference
Karina, Lilian, and Marion Kant

Jessica Berson is Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter in the UK, where she teaches courses in dance and theatre studies, choreography, and movement analysis. She is a Certified Laban Movement Analyst and has published in TDR, and she has essays in Community Performance: A Reader (Routledge, 2008) and Bodies in Commotion: Disability in Performance (University of Michigan Press, 2005). She is working on a monograph on the corporatization of erotic dance in the US and the UK.

New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology