

A Moment in Time

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We go to press with this spring issue in the hope that the policies of our new President can lift American society on economic, social, cultural, and political levels, to move past the worst devastations of Covid-19 toward new beginnings. For *PAJ*, it is also a special marker, the start of our forty-fifth year of publication, which commenced in May 1976. For those in theatre, there is the feeling that in the months ahead stages may be re-opening and live audiences slowly returning to their seats. In light of that hopeful feeling of theatre coming back to life, there may be a special joy in the selection of Julian Beck's previously unpublished account from his journal of the January 1959 opening of the Living Theatre's 14th Street theatre, with William Carlos Williams's *Many Loves*. Beck painstakingly details all the work involved with the building of brick walls, the pouring of cement, working with carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and city inspectors, along with the anxiety of being ready for opening night, and then rejoicing at the party afterwards, filled with an artistic who's who documented in his entry with historic photos.

As with recent issues, a considerable number of the new pieces published in this issue were written in the midst of the global pandemic. Playwright-director Robert Quillen-Camp created a visual poetic text in the form of a map as guide to the headphone and headset modes of experiencing theatre, by way of discussing various tech generations from the Walkman to Zoom. Along the way he draws on Merleau-Ponty, Shakespeare, Wilder, Rimini Protokoll, and Godard. Composer Joseph Diebes looks at the work of Alan Lomax, known for his historic recordings of folk music in the forties and fifties, which led to his system of cantometrics to quantify the folk songs of every culture. It can be understood as a precursor to algorithmic profiling that dominates social media and marketing strategy in our own time, especially when considered alongside public service announcements quantifying a long list of statistics on Covid and the American public.

The brilliant Berlin-based media artist Hito Steyerl turns a Dusseldorf retrospective canceled by the pandemic into an occasion for reimagining a series

of livestreamed zoom events. Instead of giving a walk-through of the exhibit, Christian de Moulpied Sancto describes how she created new material related to the pandemic, reflecting on conditions for communications during quarantine, and addressing far-right politics, anti-lockdown protests, and AI profiling. The Wilma Theatre staging of Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, reviewed by Bess Rowen, notes that the company quarantined in the Pocono Mountains while filming their production that was eventually livestreamed. The British-Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al Bassam reveals in a conversation with Geoffrey Lokke that his play *Mute* grew out of his helplessness as a theatre-maker confronting closed theatres and canceled projects, in addition to being a response to the political violence and corruption that came to a head in the recent explosions in Beirut.

In the absence of live theatre, Isaiah Wooden turned to recent documentaries on Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin, against the background of the Black Lives Matter protests surrounding the death of George Floyd and occurring at the same time as the Covid crisis. With the increased interest in black political movements, histories, and authors, these documentaries on two intellectual giants offer new research and understanding of their importance in American culture. Hansberry, a playwright and political activist had her life in letters cut short by early death at the age of thirty-five, while James Baldwin has been rediscovered by a new generation of readers and reread by those who had already been familiar with his eloquence before his death in 1987. Playwright-director John Jesurun, in lieu of directing his new work, took to the streets and empty theatres to capture the images of emptiness and loss in the deserted spaces of theatrical activity. He discovered that space and light had changed in the way people now viewed daily events. The writer Carol Becker took another direction in reflecting on her life over the last year of social distancing and solitary living. She offers a meditation on *not* traveling and the process of looking inward, how that impacts one's relationship to the outside world and to the past. Intriguingly, she draws on Freud's essay "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," connecting her own travels to Greece through exploring the revelation by Freud of the importance of travel to the psychoanalytic process of freeing buried aspects of the self. What she discovers has to do with staying in place and understanding one's biography in deeper tracings.

In the experience of the last year, each individual has had to experience life in alternative ways, for better or worse. Unfathomable numbers of people have lost their lives, and those who live to see each new day consider how to go forward. It has been a year of isolation, anxiety, self-discovery, preservation, work, and caretaking. Life and death matters. I had been thinking about these conditions when I went this afternoon to see an exhibit of paintings by Giorgio Morandi,

who over decades gave to the still lives of ordinary vases, bowls, and bottles an immense intensity and feeling of presence. In his own observations of work and life there is a lesson for our present moment: "One can travel the world and see nothing. To achieve understanding it is necessary not to see many things, but to look hard at what you do see."