

Present Tense

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1976. It was a very good year. The world that PAJ entered upon its founding forty years ago was made by artists and audiences and critics and editors, artistic directors and founders of organizations, spaces, publications, and all the cafés and bookstores and galleries. Everyone who lived and worked downtown understood that the performance culture was something they helped to make. They cared about it, fought over it, wrote about it. Downtown was held together and felt important because it was valued by all those who worked in this artistic world. Valuing it meant that there were standards of achievement and excellence, acknowledging that it was also O.K to fall short because the work was part of the “experimental” arts.

PAJ was conceived in one of the then well-known Village spots, Café Borgia, at the crossroads of Bleecker and MacDougal streets, across from the legendary Café Figaro, both no longer there. Shortly after starting out it was edited from a \$300-a-month railroad apartment on St. Marks Place, a celebrated street that is itself the subject of a new book. Two of the founders of Mabou Mines, Ruth Maleczech and Lee Breuer, lived in the same building where their Re.Cher.Chez studio eventually opened in the basement. Today it seems that the dangerous and dirty streets of a Manhattan on the verge of bankruptcy during the mid-1970s is exerting a strange charm for a city that is now gentrifying block by block, and displacing the old neighborhood inhabitants and small shops with over-designed and high-priced restaurants and boutiques. The new economy has decentralized the downtown community and made it impossible to live and make art in Manhattan with a modest income.

What I remember throughout the seventies more than any feeling of fear was the youthful excitement of going to graduate school, writing for the *Soho Weekly News*, starting the journal with fellow student Gautam Dasgupta, seeing theatre several nights a week, and sitting leisurely in cafes. There were no teaching jobs in NYC when we left graduate school so we had other jobs and started the journal, with no clear vision of its future. When someone stopped by the PAJ office with

an article we felt free to drop everything and talk for two or three hours about theatre and books and who was doing what new work.

Publishing is very different now that so much communication is done by email, and who would visit the office and stay for a long conversation and then follow that with dinner? Spontaneity has become a rarity in the controlled access to overscheduled lives. Interface is just not the same as face-to-face as the inhabitants of twenty-first-century cafés sit mainly behind computer screens, rarely conversing with strangers. In “The Time of Broken Windows,” which he wrote for the October 12, 2015 issue of the *New Yorker*, critic Louis Menand reminds readers that unemployment was 11% by 1976 and in the prior six years over 600,000 jobs were lost in New York. “The decade between 1972 and 1982 was the worst extended economic period since the nineteen-thirties,” he points out. Looking at old photos of SoHo, on the edge of which the journal eventually moved due to climbing prices in the East Village (!), I am reminded of its dilapidated buildings and dark, grimy streets of broken cobblestones, which have long disappeared to be replaced by fashionable shops and multi-million dollar luxury apartments taking more and more of the sky. Little could I have imagined that the Fluxus “Tour for Foreign Visitors” that I participated in on the streets of SoHo, with Nam June Paik, George Maciunas, and Jill Johnston, on May 4, 1976, would decades later become obsolete in a neighborhood where so many tourists now map out their own journeys on smartphones.

No sooner had I begun to think about what I might write for an editorial at the start of our fortieth year, than I came upon another article on the seventies, this one by the writer Edmund White, published a month earlier in the *New York Times*, on September 10, under the headline, “Why Can’t We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s?” By now numerous references to the seventies had been working their way into print and social media. Besides recalling the affordable food and housing, the accessibility of people, the high quality of the arts, and the mixture of social groups that characterized that era, what caught my eye in White’s article is his observation that “it was the last period in American culture when the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow still pertained,” and that it reflected “a late-age Modernism and a 1960s-era radicalism: a paradoxical combination of elitism in aesthetics and an egalitarianism bordering on socialism and utopianism in politics.”

Today, I think what people realize is missing in New York City is any sense of bohemian life that characterized downtown in that era, though admittedly it is a much safer and more beautified place. A city needs an avant-garde culture, just as art does. For those who experienced the remarkable artistic and intellectual city life in the seventies there was certainly an edgy feeling of freedom and creativity

and promiscuity in all its manifestations, held together by a fairly stable common core of arts knowledge. Any attempt at compiling a list of remarkable and long-lasting artists and artworks produced downtown in the years immediately before or after *PAJ* began publishing would sound too boastful. This is the world *PAJ* entered into, supported, and was shaped by, and to whose history it would contribute.

Indeed, recent books have also brought attention to this period in New York, including Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* (her new *M Train* is in part an ode to drinking coffee in neighborhood cafés), Brad Gooch's *Smash Cut*, Edmund White's *City Boy*, Rachel Kushner's novel *The Flamethrowers*, and the new *City on Fire* by Garth Risk Hallberg, celebrated as a devastatingly accurate novel set in New York City in the seventies. Art exhibits, television shows, memoirs, essays, and journalistic references continue to focus on this historical moment. It's impossible not to refer to the seventies at this starting point of our fortieth year. For the 100th issue, in 2012, I wrote extensively about the evolution of *PAJ* through the decades and their different demands on a journal, and in relation to changes in the field of theatre and criticism. But "100" was about the content of so many journal issues up to then. The "fortieth year" represents more of a reflection on the passage of time. So, you will pardon me if I have brought some murky black-and-whites into our high-definition era.

When all is said and done that was then, and now is now. I am not interested in the seventies as a nostalgia trip but rather as a point of historical context and always-present archive of personal memory since this is the artistic world in which I found myself as a young critic. My first book, *The Theatre of Images*, was completed the same year, 1976, *PAJ* was founded, and it included everything I knew about the contemporary arts up to that time, learned mainly from the artists downtown. If decades ago critics and audiences were preoccupied with attempting to understand and write about the American arts in their breakaway from Europe and creation of singular vocabularies, now our tasks are different. What are they, I wonder?

One of the long-term interests of *PAJ* is the development of performance history, which is why we have been recently publishing memoir-style contributions—Anna Koos of Squat Theatre, Kenneth King on the Warhol Factory, Kestutis Nakas on the Pyramid Club, and in this issue, Tom Walker of the Living Theatre, whose narrative also serves to honor the peerless Judith Malina, who died this year. Likewise, the entire archive of *Live*, the zine-style magazine we published from 1979-1982—a virtual who's who of the downtown performance scene—has become available free to subscribers on our website. In addition to our commitment to dramatic forms, represented in *PAJ 112* by Richard Maxwell's *Isolde*,

there is the attention to artists' writings and original works, with contributions by Douglas Dunn and Oana Cajal. Carol Becker provides a thematic essay that considers utopia in our age and, coinciding with his 100th birthday in 2016, is an essay by Eric Bentley on political theatre, a classic from the journal's archive for a new generation of readers. As we move into the future, PAJ Publications, the book division begun in 1979, has also begun publishing a series of small-size paperbacks, called *Performance Ideas*, for titles that crossover all live art forms.

To some extent editing a journal is a utopian project in itself that compels everyone involved to keep searching for those thought-provoking works and essays, and the dialogue around them, that open up unknown pathways in consciousness. What I have carried away from the seventies is the sense that there could be great pleasure in being drawn into imagined worlds other than our own, where images generate their forms of new knowledge and texts reconstitute language. From the start, *PAJ* has held the belief that the health of any art form is tied to the rigor of critical thinking circulating around it. Artistic experiences that break through the known world bear gifts of intellectual prowess and wonder and disturbance, reconfiguring the natural order of sight and speech. They have a reality all their own.

Surveying the vast field of theatre now it seems that a sense of taking pleasure in the experience of artworks themselves is frequently missing, that they are regarded essentially as a manifestation of culture—a statement about something else. Joyfulness in the sheer engagement with art can be overwhelmed by an inability to distinguish between the self and the work, the work and the theory. I ask myself, Is there too much critique in writing on the arts today? Do so many works have to be “subversive,” a form of “resistance,” or “intervention” to be worthy: how have they earned those descriptions?

Theatre finds itself in difficult times. The high quality and proliferation of journalistic reporting can make plays, especially documentaries that engage in forms of reportage, seem redundant or obsolete. Visual art forms offer a strong challenge to theatre's own strategies in film and electronic media. The play is forced to contend with television drama's reputed “Golden Age,” praised for highly developed characters and psychological acting, or TV sitcoms that provide the sociological arguments once found in dramatic literature—all of which the downtown theatre in revolt moved away from a half-century ago.

For a long time I have thought that in theatre there is an excess of lamentation over social crises merely replicating the same themes already saturating the culture rather than generating works of the imagination and uncharted territories of intellectual argument and soulfulness. Theatre, too, needs larger ambitions than

to continue to appropriate works of the past, fixate on pop culture icons, or stage old films—and expect audiences to assume they are inherently a form of critique. What’s missing from theatre is an emotional gravity, laser-sharp penetration into the inner life of the human being, desperate but necessary poetics: the scarcity of distinctive writing (and text-making) in the non-mainstream theatre is of noticeable concern, after three decades of collages of texts and non-theatrical sources strung together, often of very little substance.

Arts writing and scholarship can have a more esteemed and long-lasting influence if it is less tethered to reigning vocabularies and concepts, and instead roots itself in a deeper understanding of art forms and artistic process as a starting point to wherever it leads. And I hope it goes to the ends of the earth. Either independent-minded, courageous critical writing is more important today than ever or it does not matter at all in the face of world-shattering transformations—political, social, environmental, economic, technological.

Most people enter the arts professions out of a love of sensual experience and the desire to imagine lives that extend beyond the rules of the workaday world, not least for an inward freedom. And yet, it is evident that funders, universities, arts organizations, academics, and artists are often running on the same track instead of generating more diverging necessities. It requires fiercely independent thinking to challenge institutionalized discourses that risk breeding (albeit pious) conformity—a responsiveness that pushes beyond the comfort of received ideas and self-promotion to grapple with extraordinarily complex dimensions of contemporary life. Perhaps what I mean is an uncompromising focus on *being*, rather than on presence or identity.

We need critical thinking against the current, offering new terms of engagement. We need works of art that are daring and beautiful and dangerous and poetic. Our theatre age calls out for more worldly, knowledgeable forms of criticism that won’t settle for what is accepted as progressive theatre. If theatre is going to be important as an art form in the future then I urge those who work in and write about it to commit to addressing what is of value in it *as art*. If I am calling for a toughness of spirit I don’t feel any contradiction in admitting to desiring at the same time a certain tenderness and philosophical urgency in the vulnerable corridors of thought.

As *PAJ* begins its fortieth year, we are grateful to the readers of our journals and books over these four decades, and to the many artists and authors whose work has filled their pages. We hope you will continue to support independent, small presses at this time of enormous transformation in the publishing industry.