

Words and Deeds

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At this extraordinary post-election period of heartbreak and disruption, in the midst of a pandemic's mounting death, and with all its repercussions for a debilitated economy, social upheaval, and a large angry segment of the population living in the alternate world of the dastardly Trump presidency, we are faced with problems so complex that even months on in this state of turmoil they defy comprehension. Fortunately, there is a man of deep experience and compassion who is ready to build the next chapter of American life on the first day he enters the White House, a man of modest beginnings perhaps now called to greatness.

Last year we had sketched out for the upcoming issues a number of topics: neglected histories; fascism and the rise of the far right; spiritual dimensions of art; technologies and media; ecological crisis. In the ensuing months of global instability and the profound impact of the coronavirus, our frame of reference has expanded to include the serious issues now facing us, namely how they may be represented in the journal. In the history of the modern and avant-garde arts, great political and social upheavals have generated powerful art movements and means of production. Tragically, they have also ushered in absolutist politics and purges on the left and the right, which should serve as a severe warning for our future.

The catastrophic twentieth century laid the foundations of contemporary art and its discourses. Will powerful forces of the artistic imagination be unleashed once again? For theatre, in particular, what new forms will evolve? Will the dialogue change? Will there be a different way of acting, or embodying character? The mainstay of the theatrical repertoire, dramatic literature, is predicated on a search for truth. What does that mean now in an age where the idea of "truth" has been denigrated? What does realism, the quintessential form of American theatre, mean any longer? For media-driven performance, will the difference between mediated and live still matter? And, what to do with the misguided appropriation of the term "performative," now used increasingly in various forms of media to signify

a false representation? Considering performance from another angle, it could be said that Trump created a debased form of “devised theatre,” whose audiences love going to a show and hearing themselves clap for a shamelessly needy actor.

Like editorial colleagues at other publications, we offered an initial response to the pandemic, publishing in the fall issue that went to press just before the lockdown in New York, the extended feature “Global Voices in the Time of Coronavirus,” featuring a collection of commentaries by thirty theatre artists from twenty countries. Now, with *PAJ* 127, we continue to focus on current conditions. For example, following our interest in cultural criticism, Vaughan Pilikian’s far-ranging essay on art, society, and capital at “the end of days,” unfolds as a blistering attack on the way we live now; Joseph Cermatori surveys recent notable books by millennials who propose strategies, mainly drawn from the “before times,” to resist digital and corporate culture’s most egregious encroachments on work and everyday life. Returning our attention to neglected histories, a special Radio Art section details the fascinating backgrounds of independent and largely subversive radio on American airwaves in the eighties and nineties—a timely connection to the influence of current alternative podcasts and public radio. In separate essays by Ashley Chang and Peter Eckersall, the exploration of theatre and visual arts highlights the impact of different approaches to the staging of ecological issues and climate change debates for contemporary audiences.

Months after the closure of theatres, many artists and institutions have organized an abundance of varied formats and work for online viewing. It will be encouraging to see their eventual impact on live theatre and whatever new modes of performance, media, and writing emerge to point the way toward rethinking theatre in the foreseeable future. It seems certain that the interchanges of theatre and audiences will expand online. At *PAJ*, we are engaging a range of material in additional areas that can include documentary films on artists; performance and protest; interviews or group discussions on timely issues; online arts events; essays on plays or performance texts; special sections on a specific theme; portfolios of drawing, photography, notation; reconsiderations of influential books in the field. We welcome other suggestions from *PAJ* readers.

We move forward to the inauguration of a new president in 2021, and the year beckons with the prospects for change in our melody of existence. Whatever key that is resolved in will depend on valuing the meaning of words and truth and fact. As a community of readers, writers, and editors, we are challenged to cut through the obfuscation and debasement of language from every quarter that sets people against each other in a culture war of words.