

do in concert: writing and remembering. In her book, Schwartz has continued this intimate act, and provided us all with a new way of thinking about gender in motion.

doi:10.1017/S0040557420000204

• • •

## Off Sites: Contemporary Performance beyond Site-Specific

By Bertie Ferdman. *Theater in the Americas*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018; pp. xii + 212, 36 illustrations; \$38 paper, \$38 e-book.

Miriam Felton-Dansky

Bard College

For decades now, we theatre people have been referring to performances staged outside of a conventional theatre venue as “site-specific.” As Bertie Ferdman argues cogently in her recent book, it’s time we stopped. In *Off Sites: Contemporary Performance beyond Site-Specific*, Ferdman offers a welcome critique of this over-used term, pointing out that the phrase “site-specific” fails to invoke any particular artistic approach. More disturbingly, its generalized application can obscure layered urban histories, the gravitational pull of international festivals and touring circuits, and the co-optive forces of immersive corporate entertainments. Over five chapters, Ferdman instead disentangles the disciplinary genealogies, performance histories, and institutional structures that have shaped our ideas about how and why theatre can be staged outside of conventional theatre stages. As an alternative, Ferdman proposes the evocative concept of “off-site”: a capacious term for understanding theatre in which the relationships between and among sites figure as a central element.

One of the book’s central interventions is to place the visual arts legacy of the term “site-specific” in conversation with multiple theatre histories of site-based work, particularly in its second chapter. (Chapter 1 functions as a theoretical and historical introduction.) The distinction between site specificity in visual arts and in theatre is hardly semantic; as Ferdman demonstrates, their different and contested histories have profound implications for the ways artists are funded, reviewed, and recognized by artistic institutions. Ferdman’s own experience serving on a New York Foundation for the Arts funding panel in 2007 provides compelling evidence here. Evaluating artists in the “cross-disciplinary” category—the sole funding category available to theatre artists who were not playwrights—Ferdman, the only panelist with a performing arts background, was surprised to learn that her fellow panelists held starkly different assumptions from hers about the value of theatre as an art form. “I was amazed to find that what I found virtuosic ‘as theatre’ (since that is what they were making), the other panelists did not find groundbreaking at all,” Ferdman writes. “No matter how innovative the use or combination of

theatrical elements, as long as the end product was, in fact, ‘a show,’ the work in their eyes was not worthy of moving to the next round” (33). Ferdman’s description of this implicit antitheatrical prejudice (though she is too gracious to use that term), housed within a major arts funding institution, makes an urgent argument for why books like hers, bringing theatrical and visual arts discourses together, are so necessary.

Other chapters engage with complementary dimensions of site-based work: its relationship to spectatorship (Chapter 3); the ways sites can transform time (Chapter 4); and how site-based work can both mark and be marked by urban spaces during contested historical change (Chapter 5). Each chapter commences with a vivid description of its central case studies, followed by a historical or theoretical overview, and then closer analysis of the artistic works under discussion. Examples are drawn from mostly North American artists, and with an emphasis on work taking place in New York City, for good reason: Ferdman’s experiences as a spectator at many of these performances lends her criticism texture and specificity.

In Chapter 3, Ferdman considers what she calls the unintended audience: those who do not have full access to the work either because they encounter it digitally after the fact or because the work itself invokes more than one geographical space. For example, for *El Chaco en Kassel*, Argentine artists Guillermo Faiovich and Nicolás Goldberg proposed to move El Chaco—a famous meteorite weighing 37,000 kilograms—to Kassel, Germany, and exhibit it at the 2012 festival Documenta 13. Beyond the logistical challenges, this plan provoked outrage particularly among Argentina’s Native communities, and was never carried out. Instead, even as El Chaco remained in Argentina, its exhibition site in Kassel went on view for the Documenta audience, who had access to everything except the central work of “art.”

Chapter 4 explores the capacity of site-based performance to alter the spectator’s relationship to time. In some cases, this means layering and bending our experience of historical time, as in John Malpede’s 2004 project *RFK in EKY*, a massive participatory reenactment of Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 visit to Eastern Kentucky. In other cases, location can displace audience members from a linear relationship to time altogether, as in Jim Findlay’s 2014 multihour immersive performance *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which participants literally were invited to sleep through the show. Chapter 5 considers projects that might be most expected by readers: the relationship between site-based performance and urban history, engaging with the historically charged term “landmark” to argue that site-based performances can simultaneously “landmark” their locations and serve as “landmarks” in the urban histories around them (111).

The book’s particular strength, and what makes me especially eager to read Ferdman’s next work, is the striking analysis she provides of institutions and structures that too often recede into the background of performance analysis. In describing a piece by theatremaker David Levine that was situated in Central Park and sponsored by the organization Creative Time, for instance, Ferdman mentions the helpful, well-organized guides and checkpoints designed to help audience members “find” the art. What if some of the legendary avant-garde performances that made site-based work significant—Tehching Hsieh’s 1981–2 *Outdoor Piece*, for

instance—had been sponsored, with logos and maps and places to check in? Would the “art” have been corporatized, demystified, ruined? Or perhaps, to the contrary, Hsieh would have had a contract, an artist fee, and someone making sure he took breaks.

In addition, Ferdman wisely leaves discussions of names familiar to those thinking about American site specificity—Reza Abdoh, for instance—for the end of the book, when the reader is poised to rethink their legacy. She writes in precise, descriptive prose, engaging theoretical concepts but emphasizing clarity in a way that will make her book accessible to specialists and nonspecialists alike. Our current artistic landscape makes a project like this one both apt and inevitable. As the author points out, old ideas about site specificity must be reevaluated when work is built to tour internationally and to be adapted to multiple sites. At the same time, the perceptual value of artwork at any given site shifts as urban neighborhoods gentrify. *Off Sites* is an important contribution to conversations about the significance of place in theatre and performance.

doi:10.1017/S0040557420000216