

RE: SOURCES
EDITED BY ANGELA WEAVER

**“SHOW PEOPLE: DOWNTOWN DIRECTORS
AND THE PLAY OF TIME”**

Reviewed by Kenneth Schlesinger

Can there be a performance without live performers? Can the plastic arts be animated to create stage movement? The 11 May–17 August 2002 installation at Exit Art in SoHo, “Show People: Downtown Directors and the Play of Time,” posed these conundrums and managed to achieve the impossible: the excitement and spontaneity of live performance in a gallery setting. For this aspect alone, the show was an appropriate tribute to directors who changed our performance landscape.

Exit Art [<http://www.exitart.org>], founded by Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo in 1982, has distinguished itself for its explorations of performance arts, contemporary culture, and emerging artists. This ambitious exhibition chronicles the contributions of six experimental directors—Reza Abdoh, Anne Bogart, Richard Foreman, Meredith Monk, Peter Schumann, and Robert Wilson—over the past forty years. Most noteworthy about these innovators is their approach to theatre production through allied visual and performing arts—sculpture, architecture, filmmaking, and choreography. Like their European progenitors from the earlier decades of the twentieth century—for example, Sergei Diaghilev, Leon Bakst, Igor Stravinsky, Adolph Appia, and Gordon Craig—these directors infused what primarily had been a text-driven medium with an explosive visual counterpart, consisting of image spectacle, oversized puppets, moving images, musical scores, and movement. This influence was immediate, galvanizing, and, in a sense, irreversible.

Curator Norman Frisch, a dramaturg and producer, selected these six directors from over fifty companies in Lower Manhattan. The exhibition had a twofold purpose: to simultaneously celebrate and reconstruct the seminal work of these masters, and to introduce this work to a younger generation of theatre practitioners. While some of the choices could be disputed (as well as omissions, such as Laurie Anderson and Lee Breuer), the rationale for including, for example, someone like Reza Abdoh could be his international background and remarkable youthful achievements (he died of AIDS at 32 in 1995). In addition, the show was intended to be evolving and interactive. Performance

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screenings changed, blending or clashing with surrounding sound collages. Visitors were encouraged to return for repeated viewing.

The six featured directors were asked to create a “self-portrait,” embodying their early work, and to contribute artifacts from their personal archives. The huge loft space at Exit Art accommodated six installations, producing a combination of performance gallery, festival stage, and carnival sideshow. Given the congruence of sensibilities (Anne Bogart names Meredith Monk’s *Quarry* as a direct influence, Wilson and Monk collaborated during the 1960s, etc.), the separate areas were integrated through lighting, mood, and spatial design, as visitors journeyed through this theatrical “fun house.”

Richard Foreman’s space (Fig. 1), not surprisingly, was both alluring and forbidding. Directly opposite the gallery entrance, visitors were greeted by a proscenium with two pillars crisscrossed with Foreman’s characteristic string and what appear to be black skulls (actually potato heads). The floor was painted with amoeboid graffiti patterns and the walls plastered with stunning black-and-white lithograph posters of Foreman productions, scene sketches, and annotated text pages. The overall effect was chaotic, cacophonous, yet extremely orderly, like a co-worker’s messy office where he or she knows exactly where everything is.

One hesitated before entering the Foreman space. Am I welcome here? A studio sign flashed, “EGO—On the Air.” To the left was a grotesque, oversized metallic puppet with crumpled newspapers. A TV monitor offered Richard Foreman as its talking head, with another monitor as a dancing hand. On the opposite side, a large painted panel “chased” a photograph of Kate Manheim as the ubiquitous Rhoda. Surrounding us on the walls were three-dimensional photographs from the *Rhoda* plays, viewable with attached lenses.

Not surprisingly, the installation space corresponded to the style of Foreman’s Ontological—Hysteric Theatre [<http://www.ontological.com>]: cerebral, didactic, and quirkily amusing. He entitled this exhibit “10 Things I Hate About the Theatre” (e.g., narrative, empathy, group response, dependence on the press), wryly expressing the deep ambivalence he feels toward the theatre and audience members. Ultimately, Foreman seemed to be constructing, physically and metaphorically, “The Wall” enclosure that rock band Pink Floyd builds between themselves and their audience during performances.

At first glance, Anne Bogart’s space (Fig. 2) appeared to be more inviting. Familiar theatrical spotlights hung at various levels. Inexplicably, a deer in a pink tutu stood, on Astroturf, in the center of the space, facing upstage. The setting was divided thematically and chronologically into Bogart’s areas of inquiry: “Site Specific,” “Dance/Theatre,” “Music Theatre,” “Classic Explorations,” and “Devised Works.” The range and breadth of her output, notably her unorthodox investigations and recontextualization of the classic repertory, were persuasively revealed.



Figure 1. Richard Foreman/Ontological-Hysterical Theatre. Photo courtesy of Exit Art, New York.



Figure 2. Anne Bogart installation. Photo courtesy of Exit Art, New York.

Clearly the most accessible and explicatory of all the installations, Bogart's production photographs, with wall labels, had the earnest charm of a high-school science project, with all the attendant self-consciousness of the production laboratory. The stills were well chosen—her East Village punk version of *At the Bottom* [*The Lower Depths*], her breathtaking postmodern Coward sets at Louisville, the gothic-noir setting *Another Person Is a Foreign Country*—and combined with insightful commentary in Bogart's assured voice (e.g., "Eduardo Machado is our present-day Chekhov").

On the other hand, Bogart gave instructions on one wall about how to enter the "ROOM" she had constructed: "Enter with an awareness. . . . Listen and be attentive with your whole body. . . . Do not speak." We rounded the corner and looked into the Room—a white, sterile space with a blue ceiling and two low wooden benches with fluorescent lights underneath. No one dared enter. Rather than Peter Brook's "empty space"—brimming with potential and theatrical magic—we regarded a prototype of Harold Pinter's room, vaguely sinister and threatening. Told to relax, we could not, a function of the rigid and doctrinaire approach of Bogart's SITI Company [<http://www.siti.org>], which she founded with Japanese director and theorist Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. Confronted with this rigidity, the warmth and spontaneity of Bogart's earlier work stood out in sharp relief.

The narrow passageway of Robert Wilson's [<http://www.robertwilson.com>] spare installation served as a bridge between the two halves of the exhibition. This installation primarily reflected Wilson's early training in architecture and graphic arts, later manifested in large-scale sets for original musical adaptations and, more recently, classical opera. Muted blues and grays formed the backdrop for a gallery of modern chairs—wire models hanging from the ceiling, chairs with neon backs, postmodern wooden chairs, tiny chairs. While designed for such historical personages in his productions as Einstein, Kafka, and Stalin, the chairs are like Frank Lloyd Wright's furniture: lovely to look at, impossible to sit in for very long. Along one wall hangs a long scroll of Wilson's storyboard sketches for his epic *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down*. The score from *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974) plays in the background, alternating musical passages with murmured exchanges and disturbing shrieks.

The installation for Reza Abdoh [<http://www.alpertawards.org/archive/winner95/abdoh.html>] was, unfortunately, the most disappointing. The room was painted black and dimly lit. Two oversized papier-mâché masks from *Tight White Right* (1993), one black, one white, were on the left, accompanied by Annie Leibovitz's production photograph of the cast, in curtain-call formation, in various states of cross- and undress. A lonely obituary graced the opposite wall. A large screen, with continuous showings of Abdoh's repertoire, dominated the room. While most of his major works have been (thankfully) recorded and preserved, these videotaped "bump ups" into grainy, large-scale projections served neither the artist nor these productions. Although moving-image



Figure 3. Peter Schumann/Bread and Puppet Theatre. Photo courtesy of Exit Art, New York.

documentation can only be a surrogate for live performance, in this instance little of the terror and exhilaration of Abdoh's arresting work came across, all the more regrettable because relatively few got to see performances by Abdoh's company, Dar a Luz, during the handful of years he lived in New York. The visual record of this oeuvre is now, however, the only way to capture Abdoh's visionary collision of classical themes and contemporary culture, a tightly choreographed, harrowing chaos. The scant number of artifacts as basic as production photographs is, therefore, inexplicable, particularly since Abdoh's papers and production materials were donated after his death to the New York Public Library's Theatre Collection, from which they could have been borrowed.

Peter Schumann's familiar, hollow-eyed puppets wreathed in bed sheets beckoned like long-forgotten friends. Schumann founded the Bread and Puppet Theatre [<http://www.theaterofmemory.com/art/bread/photos.html>] on the Lower East Side in 1963, where it quickly became a mainstay of street theatre and public protests. The installation (Fig. 3) comprised several groups of standing figures of varying sizes, one a skewed Nativity scene with Mary cradling a young donkey. The ceiling was densely packed with row upon row of hanging red figures, reminiscent of bats in caves, bringing to mind the whimsical sets of Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute*. Red painted slogans adorning the walls were alternately angry, nonsensical, or naïve (e.g., "Insurrection Against the Existing Order of Life," "The American Sleep," "Coffeetables Unite Against Junk Mail"). These striations of artifice seemed flat and (ultimately) impenetrable: their shrill silence, in retrospect, made them all the more hapless and impotent, like a wheezy old carousel. Similarly, the puppets themselves, simply by their nature, while once driven by the era's urgent social agenda, now appeared serendipitous and playfully ironic. (Schumann ultimately forswore direct political engagement ["The Revolution is Within"], supplanting it with a sickening, flaccid spirituality ["God is Garlic"]). While Bread and Puppet's influence on the development of popular spectacle and its validation of American puppetry are unassailable, its inclusion as a permanent "downtown" fixture is arguable, given that, by the early 1970s, Schumann had already fled to rural Vermont.

For an expression of genuine spirituality, one did not need to look any further than the Meredith Monk [<http://www.meredithmonk.org>] installation (Fig. 4), the most successfully integrated of all the spaces. Coolly inviting in restful shades of periwinkle, the room's composition achieved the sense of equilibrium and wholeness Monk seeks in her work, work that uniquely combines original music, vocalization techniques, group movement, and cinematic backdrops. Features from Monk's *16 Millimeter Earrings* (1966)—red streamers blown by a fan to create a "fire," her face projected on a paper sphere—occupied the left portion of the space, with a long, internally lit vitrine ahead containing shoes Monk claims to have worn in her pieces (sandals, ballet slippers, high-top tennis shoes, flippers, hiking boots, *kothurni*). Three freshly painted white "singing suitcases" (lift lids gently) in the center of the space

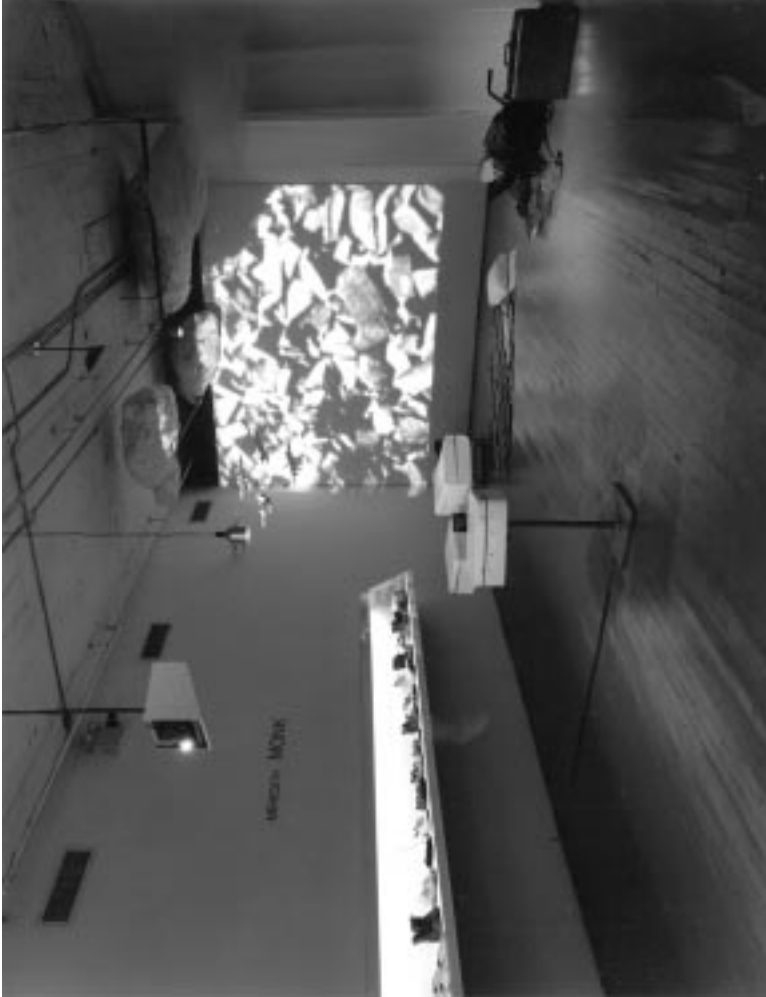


Figure 4. Meredith Monk installation. Photo courtesy of Exit Art, New York.

serenaded the viewer, suggesting the combination of elements characteristic of Monk's work.

The right side of Monk's space featured elements from *Quarry: an opera* (1976), atmospherically exploring World War II. Here, a quilt became a child's bed, with a 1940s radio blaring out the score. A black-and-white film relief showed people slowly clambering over boulders. Overhead, puffy clouds and antique model airplanes decorated the sky. Down front, a wheelbarrow filled with rocks and a large suitcase represented Monk's themes of dislocation and impermanence. Small monitors allowed spectators to view and listen to the performance tapes. The stylish composure of the space was, overall, reassuring.

At the entrance to the exhibit, visitors were welcomed by a long table displaying books about the six principals, with brief, incomplete bibliographies appended to some of their printed chronologies. Fronting Exit Art's café, connecting Abdoh with Schumann, was a detailed timeline listing the artists' overlapping activities for the past four decades. At the top, major and minor world events were reported: the JFK assassination, Watergate, the debuts of MTV and the PC, the collapse of Enron and the World Trade Center towers. Inside the café, visitors could watch additional works by the directors. Simultaneous with the exhibit, Anthology Film Archives, a downtown avant-garde film repository, offered a screening and discussion series devoted to these and related artists' works. Unfortunately, though the exhibition itself demanded a published catalog to document this historic group of visionaries, none was prepared.

At times uneven in its presentation, "Show People: Downtown Directors and the Play of Time" was a bold and provocative effort to transport the excitement of live performance into a gallery setting. By having the artists participate directly in the interpretation of their own retrospectives, the exhibit both created unique, freestanding art objects and fostered new connections to, and fresh perspectives on, these postwar innovators of the experimental theatre.