

Introduction – Performance and Critical Optimism

In this the fourth edition of “Performance Paradigm,” we explore emergent themes in performance and culture in the first decade of C21. We sought creative contributions “directed towards mining the symbolic power of performance to reimagine the world” that might discuss how “imaginative resources of artists are endlessly renewable,” thus, foregrounding questions of ecology and sustainability. Of the wide-ranging responses we received, in the form of essays, interviews, and performance documents, we were impressed by the optimism of the contributions. They explore how performance is interacting with contemporary themes of ecology, globalism, technology, species debates and naturally, there are many critical evaluations of these aspects of our world. But overall, the contributions for *Emergences* seem to have left behind the heavy dystopian tone of late 1990s and early C21 discourses and artworks. This is a departure which may signal an important shift in performance and cultural debates. What are the reasons for this?

Since the CFP for this issue was distributed in mid 2007, Australia has abandoned its neo-conservative experiment and kicked out a tired and bitter government. The new government ratified the Kyoto protocol, apologised to the stolen generations of indigenous Australia and closed the offshore concentration camps for asylum seekers, all in its first week. As the Australian experience shows, its still early days in C21, and there may still be time for politics in other places to similarly reject the aggressive and authoritarian neo-conservative agenda. The decline of the neo-con elites mired in their self-made catastrophe, alongside the emergence of resistance movements and the slow-burning opposition to the politics of fear in places like the US, Britain and Australia offers cause for hope. It must be said that a world without George Bush in the White House, a world that for reasons of necessity is slowly moving to less materialist and more sustainable practices and perspectives (yes and only in developed economies) can only be an improvement.

The key debates of C21 are already taking shape in the shadow of these events in the form of an emerging awareness of the number and variety of global crises such as warming and species decline. Contributions to this edition address these debates centrally in their contents and analysis but, as noted, avoid dwelling on an overall dystopian aesthetics. Instead, there is a strong sense of the present or tangible potential for change in many of the works discussed here even if that sense is decidedly performative and parodic. The essays address art events that happen in local neighbourhoods, in response to urbanisation, economic transformation, dislocations of self in the world. Or they explore alternate ways of being in and understanding the world. The important point here is the extent to which all of these experiences are in some senses reinvested with tonalities of the real. Perhaps in response to the real sense of crisis that was produced in the early years of C21, artists are also reinvesting in the tangible.

It is also interesting that in this edition on emergences, there is as much material about ideas of historical consciousness and memory, as there is about the present and future possibilities of radical experiment in art. Many of the essays and pieces herein seek to address and/or propose innovative and path-braking forms of performative culture while also showing the lingering sensibilities of past experiences. In referencing the past, many of the contributions have the sense of documenting, exploring and reminding us of the real and sometimes painful sensations of things that were once here and are now gone. Memory here becomes a substantive thing, realised in works that explore spatial geographies, identity formation, cultural difference and popular culture among other themes. In this way a more experimental syncretic dialectic emerges. This is a dialectic taking cues from memory alongside proposals for more sustainable living practices, for the necessity of hybridity, for greater understanding of the ripple effects of a singular act. This is a form of critical optimism, perhaps the crucial feature of these observations and experiments in performance and culture in early C21.