

*Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*, by Jan Cohen-Cruz (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)

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As an emerging Australian community-engaged artist, scholar and teacher in the 1990s, I used to struggle to find resources to help me critically contextualise community performance. I found theory in this area dominated by texts like Ann Jellicoe's *The Community Play* (source of the overtly celebratory "Colway method" of community theatre making); or by the psycho-political writings of Augusto Boal, and/or related theatre-in-development models, tied to Marxist political models and forum theatre methods (Boal, 1985; Jellicoe, 1987). In Australia, writing in this area seemed focused closely on local issues, sociological frameworks, and governmental funding rhetoric, rather than on analysis of this particular form of art-making (Hawkins, 1993). None of these texts helped me to frame the socially engaged, interdisciplinary, polyphonic and increasingly site-specific performance events I was observing, and taking part in creating. Of course, the field of Performance Studies has always been fascinated with theorising localised performance practices and it is here I eventually found my (inter)disciplinary home. This was despite the evident wariness of PS scholars for terms like 'community' with all of its connotations of communal organisation and reception, famously critiqued by Blau as 'the merest facsimile of remembered community paying its respects not so much to the still echoing signals of a common set of values but to the better forgotten remains of the most exhausted illusions' (Blau, 1990: 2).

The climate I describe, however, has radically shifted since this time, both in Australia and globally. Scholar-artists like Jan Cohen-Cruz have been at the forefront of this change and her latest book *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response* (Routledge 2012) is the latest in a long line of research projects and conferences, web archives, monographs, textbooks and university programs, arising from both theatre and performance, which all attempt to draw larger theoretical frameworks for performance events immersed in localised networks of social interrelation, and/or actively engaging professional and non-professional participants to animate locally relevant subject matter. The term 'community' has remained as a way to point to the importance of intimacy, habitus and the social network, whilst acknowledging the restrictive and liberatory nature of the social narratives, borders and boundaries that shape our daily lives. Whilst theorist/practitioners of 'applied theatre', 'community-based performance', or even 'new genre public art', may quibble over terminology, there is now a much better understanding of the particularity of live acts created through partnerships between artists and communities (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001; Kupperts & Robertson, 2007; Maxwell & Winning, 2001; Prentki & Preston, 2009; Van Erven, 2001).

In *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response* Cohen-Cruz examines what she calls 'engaged art'. She argues for the term 'engaged' as she believes it 'foregrounds the

*relationships* at the heart of making art with aspirations, and dependence on a genuine exchange between artist and community such that one is changed by the other' (3). Cohen-Cruz argues 'engagement', has an 'historical connotation of commitment, but [is] unfettered by assumptions of aesthetic mediocrity and strictly material usefulness such as encumbers its manifestation as community-based or applied art' (3). In this way, she elides the tired rhetoric of arguing over the importance of non-artistic 'process' vs. innovative 'product' in community arts, by clearly demonstrating that theatre and performance practices have a longstanding history of experimental social engagement at the quotidian level.

The text examines a number of key 'engaged' practices and tracks the ways they have shifted and hybridised in contemporary contexts. The book is divided into seven sections, addressing the themes of: Playwrighting; Spect(a)cting; Self-Representing; Cultural Organizing; Gathering Assets; Particularising Place; and Training. Each section ends with what Cohen-Cruz calls a 'Workbook', with practical exercises for the classroom, aimed at a tertiary education context. These are excellent resources for those teaching in the area of community theatre and performance, drawn from companies that Cohen-Cruz has worked with, and include step-by-step guides, tips and advice. *Engaging Performance* begins with socially-engaged playwrights, including Bertolt Brecht and modern Epic writers like Tony Kushner; then moves on to examine modern adaptations of older play texts. The book explores the work of Augusto Boal and contemporary US-based Boalian practitioners. Cohen-Cruz then addresses the work of a number of 21st century US companies and artists working with communities in the areas of testimonial performance, performance utilizing communications strategies, community organisation, and community-based, site-specific performance (as examined through the writings of human geographer, Doreen Massey). Advice for setting up training programs in engaged art is included, with source material drawn from a major study on US college and university programs undertaken in 2007 by Cohen-Cruz, cultural consultant Arlene Goldbard and Appalachia-based theatre director Dudley Cocke. For Cohen-Cruz this structure allows '(e)ach chapter of the book...to present a different way in which artists participate in the challenge of their times'(13).

Cohen-Cruz has been a dominant force in the field and her diverse experience is threaded through as examples throughout this book. Her own edited volumes *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism* (with Mady Schutzman- 1993), *Radical Street Performance* (1998), and more recently her monograph *Local Acts: Community-based Performance in the United States* (2005) are key texts in the discipline. Her ground-breaking work as an educator in grassroots performance at New York University in the Tisch School of Performing Arts (1989-2006) brought students and community-based organisations together in new constellations and relationships around issues including community gardens, gentrification, and community responses to disaster and violence. She continues this important work today as Professor in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University. Her scholarly and pedagogical practice is grounded in her extensive training and practice in physical theatre, street theatre and a

number of intercultural practices, and in her broader policy/development work in national US think-tanks and institutions. It is difficult to think of someone more embedded in all aspects of community performance scholarship and practice.

Perhaps Cohen-Cruz's long pedigree in these US contexts goes somewhat to explaining the relatively US centred approach to this topic. The contemporary case studies in this book, although culturally diverse, are all US based. This is surprising given the broad title and universalised theoretical scaffold of the book. Whilst this focus was marked in the introduction ('largely ...US practitioners whose work resonates beyond their geographical parameters'), it was never made clear what this particular selection offered in terms of framing this international field of practice (1). Whilst Cohen-Cruz clearly states the work is not 'an encyclopaedia', she does aim to 'present enough of a picture of engaged performance and its particular place in the constellation of art that practitioners, scholars and audiences can recognize other such examples of work when they encounter it' (13). One does wonder, however, what new visions of 'engaged art' might emerge with an examination of just a few of the many available examples of contemporary community-based practices occurring outside the USA?

It is also unclear from the selection of examples how contemporary new media community performance might fit into this model? For example, how might we understand community-based 'call' and 'response' inside the fraught socio-economic realities of 21st century social networks, virtual reality and other online performance nodes, and as we negotiate what danah boyd reminds us is an increasingly 'networked public sphere' (boyd, 2010)? As artists seek to reach and to examine community through these more networked understandings of 'self' and 'other' and through the mixed and augmented 'realities' of contemporary lives, issues of cultural identity, power dynamics, corporate involvement, and intentionality in community-based practices become ever more complex (Lobel, 2011).

For Cruz, using the rhetoric of 'engaged art' can serve a number of purposes. She wishes to establish that 'such work fits in the continuum of art'. This is, according to Cruz, important so that people working in this area get the respect they deserve, the public experiences art in many guises, and young people attracted to performing arts careers have more options as to what this field could entail (10). Secondly, she aims to 'point performing artists who want to participate in large issues of our shared social life to a broad palette from which to choose how to make such work' (11). Thirdly she aims to be an example of praxis, in order to 'model the interplay of reflection and action that characterizes cultural activism' (12). In this third aim she explicitly sets the audience of her book as 'instructors' in the college classroom, or in informal learning settings. She also cites an aim to draw on 'internationally recognized theories' that 'illuminate' theatrical methodologies for engagement (1).

Yet, disappointingly, many of the notable parallel efforts in this vein are not discussed in this work. The 2007 *Routledge Reader in Community Performance* and accompanying

workbook *Community Performance: An Introduction* are not referred to, despite the editors' extensive work to engage with an international network of scholars and artists and to bring together workbook exercises and analyses across the field. Eugene Van Erevan's 2001 book and video, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives*, or the work he has continued with the International Festival of Community Art, and the research initiative Community Art Lab, in Utrecht, are also not cited; nor are key theoretical texts of direct relevance to the theme of the book, on topics such as site-specificity in community performance, political efficacy in community performance, or relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002; Kershaw, 1992; Kwon, 2002). Surely these efforts could all contribute to a nuanced discussion of 'engaged art'? There also seems to be little insights from writers in countries where theatre has been at the forefront of social contestation and 'engagement' for many years now, for example Ireland, the Philippines, Kenya, South Africa (D'Arcy, 2006; Fernandez, 1997; Kruger, 1999; Ngugi, 1997).

The strength in this book, however, lies in its focus on the nature of relationship, on what Cohen-Cruz calls the 'call and response' of engaged art. She calls this process 'iterative', as these calls may originate at any phase of the performance making process, and may in turn produce more calls and responses (1). In each of her examples, artists and communities are in close conversation, however difficult this might be, and the voices are not limited to celebratory triumph narratives. In fact, unlike many community workbooks based in the Colway method, or in diluted Boalian therapy models, Cohen-Cruz confronts the nature of this work by demanding that scholars and their students '(b)ring together as many opposing points of view as possible'. She claims at one point: 'You want conflict' (110). Her meticulously documented case studies, set inside the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, in post 9/11 Border Patrol contexts, in prisons, in post Katrina New Orleans, and in depleted urban neighbourhoods, all showcase complex social calls and a range of diverse cultural responses. Not all of these connections are successfully articulated or acted upon, and the author highlights how many are fraught with sensitivities, opposition and vulnerabilities. It is Cohen-Cruz's eloquently argued demand that engaged art work continue to respond to the 'call' of these diverse voices which makes this work both timely and central to study in this field. One does hope, however, that continuing international critical scholarship in this area can also be shaped through such a method of openness to different critical and artistic voices, perhaps a kind of scholarly 'call' and 'response'?

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