In the late 1960s we entered the era of postmodernism (a term first used in architecture), in which two events occurred to stop the “advance” of avant-garde drama. The first was the embrace by postmodern playwrights of a stylistic pluralism, an eclectic and often self-reflexive mixing of different styles from different time periods. Under modernism, the argument goes, a variety of styles had flourished, but within any one style (such as expressionism or surrealism) the artist sought unity by adhering consistently to the set of conventions associated with that mode. The problem with this definition of modernism, at least when it is extended to the history of drama, is that the mixing of radically different styles—as well as the frequently concomitant calling attention to the fact of artistic creation—was already evident in the work of avant-gardists from the 1920s, not to mention earlier in the experimental plays of August Strindberg.

A more sophisticated version of the postmodern argument claims that it is not the mere presence of eclecticism and self-referentiality that distinguishes postmodernism, but rather their different cultural positioning and use within a postmodern context. Instead of functioning within an avant-garde ethos in which the gesture of self-consciously mixing styles constituted a typical attempt to occupy the position of “most advanced and subversive trend,” self-reflexive pluralism in postmodern culture marks an exhaustion of the subversive energies and ambitions once associated with the avant-garde. What has happened over a century’s time is that artists—chastened by what has happened in the world during that period—have ceased believing in the efficacy of revolutionary art to change the world, while still mouthing the slogans about, and going through the motions to make art designed to do just that: transform the order of society. Furthermore, the ideologies and techniques of earlier avant-gardes are still conveniently lying around, ready to be picked through, recycled, and called to reserve duty by their inheritors, who no longer imagine themselves as belonging to a single movement (The quintessential example of such drama from the recent
past, in form as well as content, is Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* [1992].

What began before World War I as a burgeoning involvement of artists in the future of their societies—if only as outcasts who believed (like Antonin Artaud) that some day they would be regarded as prophets—had subsided by the decade of the 1970s into an acknowledgement that progressive artistic programs would not be, nor could ever be, adopted and experienced by the vast majority of any country’s citizens. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson, all that was, and is, left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum of the past. Or, as Ihab Hassan has put it, only indeterminacies—“discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness”—and deformations—“deconstruction, displacement, disjunction, decomposition”—can be identified as central to postmodernism.

Therefore, the avant-garde remains with us today only as a sanctioned aesthetic predilection. Struggling within the confines of a self-reflexive formal orientation and against an ill-defined social context of liberal and diffusive pluralism, such an avant-garde bears curious witness to an ambiguous state of mind. It attempts to display a creative and critical vitality, yet raises only minimal expectations. It countenances an active and often aggressive assertion of individual will, yet betrays an uneasy acquiescence and resignation. Its most significant efforts do continue to involve the self-conscious exploration of the nature, limits, and possibilities of drama and theater (the most naturally reflexive of art forms) in contemporary society. However, the vision of the future—of the avant-garde’s future as well as that of society and culture in general—provided by such work is tentative and unclear, suggesting that the avant-garde could not move beyond doubt and distrust toward an inspired vision.

Reworking the military metaphor underpinning the notion of avant-gardism (which originally referred to the “advance party” that scouts the terrain up ahead of the principal army), one could argue that we have entered a period in which the culture of negation has been replaced by a demilitarized zone, flanked by avant-garde ghosts on one side and a changing mass culture on the other. The once subversive styles of the avant-garde have been assimilated by mass culture, that is, so that the gap between nominally avant-garde products and popular, mass cultural ones, such as Julie Taymor’s *Lion King* on Broadway or television’s MTV, is greatly reduced. If the historical avant-garde once consisted of wave after wave of anti-bourgeois, mostly left-leaning, angry yet visionary artists pouring themselves out onto a hostile shore (a beachhead, to use the obvious military metaphor), then according to this argument each successive wave has been
soaked up by the society it had apparently hated and opposed. Each wave has been co-opted and made fashionable, turned into a style in competition with other styles, by what was formerly seen as a clearly identifiable enemy (the official culture’s dogmatically imposed system of values and beliefs).

As a result, the avant-garde can today do little more than impotently express disenchantment with its own ideals, while popular culture is enchanted to assume the once radical posture of inventiveness, daring, and “difference.” Indeed, in what could be the ultimate indignity, the very phrase “avant-garde” has itself now become a marketing device: for example, as the name of a line of deodorant in Great Britain. Moreover, the objects of the avant-garde have become useful investment commodities for the “Establishment,” in the form of paintings, sculptures, and even theatrical posters that adorn the walls of major corporations—purportedly in the name of culture, education, and refinement.

The second event to stop the “advance” of the avant-garde was, and is, the deification of postmodern performance, through the merging of author and director into a single “superstar” (like Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, Andrei Serban or Peter Sellars, Tadeusz Kantor or Robert Lepage), as well as through the breaking down of boundaries between dramatic forms and performance styles, between styles and periods, and between the arts themselves. Again, however, we may find the presence of such events, particularly that of the latter breakdowns, within modernism: for instance, in the synesthesia of the symbolists or in the writing of plays by artists from different media or according to the dictates of a different artistic medium. (Among these works we may count Henri Rousseau’s *A Visit to the Paris Exposition of 1889* [1889], Arnold Schönberg’s *The Lucky Hand* [1913], Jean Cocteau’s *Parade* [1917], Guillaume Apollinaire’s *The Color of Time* [1918], Ernst Barlach’s *The Poor Cousin* [1919], Oskar Schlemmer’s *The Figural Cabinet I and II* [1922-23], and Pablo Picasso’s *Desire Caught by the Tail* [1941]).

When we see something like this breakdown after World War II, in the “happenings” of the American painter Allan Kaprow from the late fifties—the original “performance art,” in the sense that visual art was “performed” by objectified human bodies—we also begin to see the cultivation of performance as art unto itself, apart from or superior to any *a priori* text. This trend was evidenced first by the attempts of artists other than Kaprow to move theater outside the confines of traditional, or text-based, theaters and to put it into more accessible and less formal surroundings. Second, emphasis was shifted in “happenings” from passive observation to active participation—from the artistic product to the viewing process—with each spectator thus becoming a partial
creator of a piece and deriving whatever meaning he or she wished from the experience, downplaying the artist’s intention or even existence. Third, simultaneity and multiple focus tended to replace the orderly sequence of conventionally, even unconventionally, scripted drama, there being no pretense that everyone at such a multimedia event could see and hear the same things at the same time or in the same order.

Many of these ideas were carried over into “environmental theater,” a term popularized by the American theorist Richard Schechner for something in between traditional productions and “happenings.” In this kind of theater, among other things, all production elements speak their own language rather than being mere supports for words, and a text need not be the starting point or the goal of a production—indeed, a text is not even necessary and therefore there may be none. In other words, fidelity to text, that sacred tenet that had so long governed performance, has become irrelevant, as postmodernism, both as a form of critical inquiry and as theater, continues to challenge whether any text is authoritative, whether a dramatic text can be anything more than a performance script—whether, in fact, the play exists at all before it is staged.

In *Blooded Thought*, Herbert Blau even conceded that “so far as performance goes, the Text remains our best evidence *after* the fact, like the quartos and folios of the Elizabethan stage.” But what, he asks, is “the nature of the Text *before* the fact?” “The idea of performance,” he suggests, “has become the mediating, often subversive third term in the on-again off-again marriage of drama and theater.” And American performance *groups* such as Mabou Mines and Grand Union, for their part, have become concerned less with what they are saying, with content, than with form and formal experiment: with the means of communicating, the places where theatrical events take place, the persons employed as performers, and the relationship of performers as well as performance to the audience. Indeed, from the start the theatrical avant-garde in the United States has been rooted more in performance than in text, in a radical performance technique that dismantles and then either discards or refashions the overwhelmingly “well-made” drama of the American stage, as confirmed by the work of the Wooster Group, the Living, Open, and Bread-and-Puppet Theatres, Ping Chong, the Ridiculous Theatre, and Robert Wilson’s Theatre of Images.

Paradoxically, something similar can be said about the formalists who practice “experimental” or “alternative” playwriting in the United States, and who trace their lineage back to Gertrude Stein if not to the early experimental plays of Eugene O’Neill. (In rejecting cogency of plot and idea in favor of the sensuality or pure form of gesture and space as well as language, Stein was surely the first
thoroughgoing American avant-garde dramatist. After her, the dominance of our realistic-naturalistic, social-problem play tradition was not challenged until Jack Gelber’s *The Connection* [1959] and Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* [1961]—until, that is, our post-World War II euphoria wore off, the Korean War erupted in the midst of the Cold War, and the Vietnam debacle loomed on the horizon.) Even in those plays of theirs that seem, on the surface, to obey established or conventional dramatic norms (those of farce, say, in Charles Ludlam’s *Reverse Psychology* [1980]), these writers ask us to step back and linger over the elements of performance—of *performance*, not text—longer than we are used to doing, in order to see how those elements contain clues to the largest meanings of the drama. The design of space, the passage of time, the rhythms of speech and movement: these “invisibles” of theater, once meant to disappear when stories or characters are compelling enough, instead emerge from the background in such plays in an attempt to tell their own stories.

The very setting of the “other” American drama seems to take on a life of its own. Landscape becomes an extension of its inhabitants, reflecting anxieties or ambitions only partly expressed in words. “The rooms besiege me,” says Jean Peters in Adrienne Kennedy’s *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), and as she struggles against them, she reveals a hypersensitivity shared by many other characters in these plays. Jeep fears the walls closing in on him in Sam Shepard’s *Action* (1975). Marion’s spirit suffocates in her husband’s townhouse in Maria Irene Fornes’s *Abingdon Square* (1987). The different kinds of compartments in Jeffery M. Jones’s 1979 play *Night Coil* (two adjacent chambers), Len Jenkin’s 1988 play *American Notes* (a motel room and lobby, a forest hideaway), and Suzan-Lori Parks’s 1990 drama *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (the hull of a slave ship, measured obsessively throughout the play) all serve as psychological pressure-cookers for their occupants. The more they know about their physical space the less they feel able to control it.

Outside, the landscape is just as restless, forcing characters to acknowledge emotions they would prefer to avoid. In Lee Breuer’s *B. Beaver Animation* (1974), a flood reduces the stage to a pile of planks, all that remains of B. Beaver’s dam. Nature will not stay outdoors in Tina Howe’s *One Shoe Off* (1993), where roots break through the floorboards, branches wind themselves around the beams, and ivy crawls up the furniture. And consider how many writers—Ronald Tavel (*Boy on a Straight-Back Chair*, 1969), Murray Mednick (*Switchback*, 1994), David Greenspan (*Son of an Engineer*, 1994), and John Steppling (*Standard of the Breed*, 1988) come immediately to mind—set their plays in vast wastelands. In some of these, a catastrophe seems imminent, or perhaps has just occurred, be
it in the form of urban warfare in Eric Overmyer’s *Native Speech* (1985), nuclear holocaust in Constance Congdon’s *No Mercy* (1986), or the death of the moon in Mae Wellman’s *The Hyacinth Macaw* (1994). In each of these plays, an enormous sky stretches above measureless darkness. Characters use up all their emotional resources just keeping their small pools of light from dwindling away. All of them could be asking the question Rhoda asks in Richard Foreman’s *Rhoda in Potatoland* (1975): “How can I relate to this place?”

As we map this new theatrical territory, we will also have to acknowledge the effect of time, another element of performance we can no longer take for granted. When dramatic narrative is observed, its passage can be excruciating: in *Action*, one intensely felt minute gives way to another, just as unremitting, as if the present tense dilated to ensure that the subtlest gradations of experience are dramatized. Equally disorienting are those plays where the past will not remain in the background and the future will not wait its turn. The former are not mere memory plays: OyamO (in 1981’s *The Resurrection of Lady Lester*), Congdon, and Kennedy each try to create a remembered world that is capable of sucking characters irretrievably into its vortex. And the latter are not standard-issue fantasies: for John Guare (*Muzeeka*, 1968), Arnold Weinstein (*Red Eye of Love*, 1961), Naomi Iizuka (*Tattoo Girl*, 1994), and Richard Caliban (*Rodents and Radios*, 1990), the speculative selves available in dream or fantasy slip the leash of the characters who have summoned them, wreaking havoc on the best-laid plans for logical, sequential storytelling.

In fact, it is the rare character in these plays who does not exist in all three tenses at once. Time becomes an almost tangible element of the environment—groped through, wallowed in, pushed back—capable, like a tornado, of dispersing a character among numerous contexts; ready, like a flood, to overwhelm him all at once with worlds ordinarily visited one at a time. This ordeal reaches its culmination in Suzan-Lori Parks’s theater, where time is space for different versions of the same character (African, and later American) on opposite sides of a single ocean.

Self-division is epidemic in all this theater: it is as if stage-time acts as an acid on its inhabitants, breaking apart images valid only for the moment they are perceived, revealing the composition of personalities beneath the surface of ordinary behavior, and sometimes allowing us to see a self and its ramifications (the kind of person a character denies, fears, or hopes to become) at the same time. The spectacle is unsettling: the person on stage, fickle about his form, cannot be trusted, nor can he trust himself. Shepard’s *Shooter* identifies a condition known to many characters when, in *Action*, he describes seeing
a collection of limbs that, despite his best efforts, he cannot claim: “When I look at my hand, I get terrified. The sight of my feet in the bathtub. The skin covering me. That’s all that’s covering me.” He is “afraid to sleep for fear his body might do something without him knowing.”

Standard psychological language is useless when it comes to describing such characters. They are not just “alienated,” for instance, when the floor barely supports them, the walls close in, and their entire world sheds a skin just when it starts to seem familiar. (“I got no references for this,” says Shepard’s Jeep. “Suddenly it’s shifted.”) “Ambivalence” doesn’t begin to suggest their radical fracturing of will. (Kennedy’s Clara sits in the margins watching movie stars “star in her life” and speak her thoughts.) “Nostalgic” or “idealistic” temperaments are not to be found here: only characters so unmoored to a context that, like Marion from Fornes’s Abingdon Square, they feel as if they are “drowning in vagueness” and “have no character.”

Nor are these characters simply “insecure” or “confused,” but rather suffer such an extreme form of self-consciousness that the self dissolves under the laser-like scrutiny of consciousness. (Foreman’s Rhoda, for instance, is unable to reconcile her body with her “body of knowledge.”) Indeed, when we look at that place onstage where a character is supposed to be—a figure bearing the burden of biography on the road to realized choices—instead we see phantoms and mannequins, and the debris of their struggle to become complete. There are figures like Dinah in One Shoe Off—donning and doffing costumes from famous plays, unable to find one that suits her self-image—and the heroine of Craig Lucas’s Reckless (1983), frequently changing her name and so, she hopes, her destiny. There are the malcontents in Muzeeka, Red Eye of Love, Jack Richardson’s Gallows Humor (1961), and Rodents and Radios, casting aside jobs and family roles in their quest for their essential identities. There are the characters in Ed Bullins’s theater—say, The Man Who Dug Fish (1967)—refusing to accept racial roles without irony. And, finally, there are the collages and force fields that stand in for character in the works of Kennedy, Breuer, and Foreman—everything that Elinor Fuchs has called (in the major study of this development, The Death of Character) “ephemeral constellations of thought, vision, and action.”

One senses that these playwrights are never sure of their characters, who seem in the shifting landscape of a play to be more than merely the sum of their actions and utterances. Yet for all their determination to penetrate their mysterious surroundings and redeem the promise of the Promised Land, these characters never feel that they arrive. Up to the last moment, their skepticism battles their
faith: individuals who began by scorning received definitions of their lives are
careful not to settle for their own. They think there is always another corner of the
setting to discover, another variation of their identity to try on. Potential lives and
future destinations remain more seductive than current experiences. Are such
characters destined for days of self-contradiction—needing clarity and self-
integration, on the one hand, and, on the other, drawn to a life of continuous
reinvention? Which state will make them feel more alive, not merely present?
Which offers both the most security and the most freedom?

The questions are left hanging, and the statements of these characters point
to something—a place, a quality, an image of oneself—that has yet to be
experienced, something that remains invulnerable to cheapening and
misunderstanding. Entire plays are summarized in such abbreviated lines as the
following: “I just wanted to be . . . ,” says Philip in Gallows Humor, and as his voice
trails off, the play opens up to reveal a picture of the need and despair (but also
the hope) behind the workings of the imagination. “I want to become—touch
some part of—,” says Jack Argue in Muzeeka, and here again speech arches
forward, trying to reach the perfect expression and the perfect attitude, to
present the most convincing incarnation of the self.

By the time we get to Action, the state of expectation is familiar, but there are
still no words for what is expected: “I’m looking forward to my life. I’m looking
forward to uh—me . . . My true position . . . up for grabs.” Another failed declaration,
or rather, a deliberate evasion of identity, for fear of its being interpreted too
narrowly? So many characters are poised on similar precipices—wondering if the
next sensation will be the one to illuminate the meaning of their lives, but also
dreading its consequences. Revelation rarely comes, and perhaps that is why
they sound ecstatic: the thrill for them is in the search, and in speaking of the
search: “I roam,” says one character. “I keep looking for the action!” says
a second. From still another: “Let’s keep pushing!”

The texture of much of this writing suggests that an obsessive encounter is
going on just beneath its surface, in which a playwright pursues rather than
merely dramatizes lives and events. Each scene is another stab at knowledge,
written less to prove a point or demonstrate a theme than to gather evidence.
Some pages even read as if the playwrights are quarreling with their own styles,
trying to elude habitual turns-of-phrase and signature rhythms. At such moments,
one imagines the writers urging themselves to stick with difficult subjects or char-
acters until they bend, past the point where they seem merely understood.
Perhaps then something unexpected—and truly revelatory—will emerge. For a
writer of such an analytic temperament, characters are propositions, meant to be
tests against the full force of the writer’s thought and action. Staging becomes a
form of inquiry; language and movement, the instruments of that inquiry. And
writing, for the most anxious of these writers, thus becomes writing-in-progress in
which dramatic form is always in question.

Enter “performance art,” privileging the indeterminacy and unpredictability of
the event over the finish and fatedness of the text. And it is performance art of
a kind so loosely defined in the Unites States that all the following qualify as, or
have called themselves, “performance artists”: Madonna, Karen Finley, Anna
Deavere Smith, Amy Taubin, Eric Bogosian, Ann Magnuson, Martha Clarke, Stuart
Sherman, Chris Burden, Linda Montano, Laurie Anderson, Jack Smith, Holly
Hughes, Vito Acconci, Winston Tong, Meredith Monk, Spalding Gray, Rachel
Rosenthal, Tim Miller, John Fleck, John Leguizamo, John Kelly, Joan Jonas, Gilbert
and George, Deborah Hay, Bill Irwin, Bob Berky, David Shiner, the Kipper Kids,
Michael Moschen, Avner (“the Eccentric”) Eisenberg, and the Flying Karamazov
Brothers. Anything can be called “art,” in other words, as long as it is
consecrated in performance—often only of the narcissistic self.

Yet even “performance art,” especially in its original incarnation as Kaprow’s
“happening,” harks back to ideas first introduced by the futurists, dadaists, and
surrealists. Impatient with established art forms, they turned first to the
permissive, open-ended, hard-to-define medium of performance, with its endless
variables and unabashed borrowings from literature, poetry, music, dance,
drama, architecture, cinema, sculpture, and painting. Alfred Jarry’s investiture of
a new personality, or performative self, for himself; Oskar Kokoschka’s
manufacture of and formal marriage to a life-sized doll; the proto-expressionist
Frank Wedekind’s enthusiastic participation in circus life together with his
practice of nudism, eurythmics, “free love,” even onstage masturbation and
urination; the Bateau-Lavoir’s celebrated banquet in honor of Le Douanier
Rousseau; the dadaists’ first program that ended in riot at the Cabaret Voltaire in
February of 1916; Sergei Eisenstein’s production of Sergei Tretyakov’s Gas
Masks (1923-24) in the Moscow Gas Factory—all these by turns playful and
impassioned, casual and programmed, serious and childlike events could be
called, by today’s definition, “performance art.”

But avant-gardists tellingly termed them “fumisteries” (figuratively, practical
jokes or mystifications) and the aesthetic motif that they embodied “fumisme.”
This is to say that these events were simultaneously the smokescreens and
cannon-shots through which the avant-garde initiated its major frontal assault on
the art of previous centuries. “Fumisteries” were never intended to be, as is
“performance art,” the thing in itself. They were the products of men who, when
their creative rhythms were most accelerated, when their most pugnacious breakthroughs in aesthetic method and concept were occurring, equated their roles as much with carnival Barker, circus clown, music-hall magician, or religious charlatan as with sage and prophet, artist and creator.

Put another way, these practitioners had some perspective on what they were doing, or enough self-doubt not to take themselves—that is, their public or performing selves—too seriously, which is one of the reasons we can take them so seriously today. In word as well as deed, scripting as well as staging, avant-gardists embodied the relativity, subjectivism, or flux of their astonishing age—not the fragmentation, flattening, and solipsism of the timorous, fleeting one to follow, in which the tepid tail of theatrical production continues, into the twenty-first century, to wag the otherwise dogged dog of dramatic art.

**Works Cited**


