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The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf: Simulacral Performance and the Deconstruction of Orientalism

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Steve Luber

THE THEATRE OF A TWO-HEADED CALF: SIMULACRAL PERFORMANCE AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF ORIENTALISM

The force with which we resist the temptation to try anything new and unknown is truly diabolical. Or has the temptation really grown too weak? That would prove that the mechanization of life has really gone so far that theatre as a social institution par excellence can no longer resist the petrification of everything into a uniform, gray, undifferentiated pulp that is only superficially heterogeneous.

—Stanisław Witkiewicz¹

In the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf's production of *Drum of the Waves of Horikawa*, Jess Barbagallo plays the curiously named Eesogay Yougayman, bedecked in a flowing black coat, a wig fit for Ziggy Stardust, and a badgerlike streak of black makeup across her face. The live music falls somewhere between the rhythmic, repetitive structures of *kabuki* and the more chaotic yet just as percussive style of punk rock, allowing Yougayman (implied to be a traditionally male character) to strut and plunge with violent swagger. She stalks the stage and falls to her knees before the object of her affection, Otane, played by Heidi Shreck, who wears a blood-red kimono and combat boots. Yougayman stares lasciviously into the audience, describing how she abandoned her studies as a samurai to see Otane: "My sickness was a ruse and yet not entirely so, for I was suffering from the malady called love. And you were the cause, Otane!" An exaggerated, almost parodic struggle ensues, in which Otane is caught by Yougayman, whose tongue wags in rhapsodic anticipation of the sexual conquest she is about to

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of Dan Gerould, whose tireless work and compassionate scholarship enabled the work of Two-Headed Calf as well as my own. His presence is missed, but his legacy will carry on.

force upon Otane as the music and guttural “huhs” from the musicians heighten to a rough, almost unbearable climax.

The scene epitomizes the challenge that the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf (2HC) presents to critical and aesthetic concern for the authentic, informed by a particular awareness of orientalism in avant-garde performance history. As Yougayman takes what he wants and defiles Otane without regard for consequences, the two performers embody the troubled discourse that ostensibly Western performance has mined from its Eastern counterparts. In this case study, I examine 2HC’s *kabuki*-inflected performances of *Drum of the Waves of Horikawa* (2007) and *Major Barbara* (2006) to address the imperialist attitude of conventions of Western performance toward Eastern forms. Venturing beyond the already problematic and orientalist dichotomy of East–West and avant-gardist ideals of aesthetic expression and autonomy, the New York–based company mobilizes what I term “simulacral performance,” a style that accepts and celebrates the impossibility of hybridized theatrical languages, thereby providing a paradoxically responsible and critical treatment of aesthetic mining.

The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf attempts to confound notions of tradition and authenticity, academicism and essential theatrical gesture. Their productions, like their methodologies, transverse histories, aesthetics, geographies, and disciplines, ultimately rendering easy categorization obsolete. The citationality of *kabuki* is an example of a specific cultural form that prompts a critical evaluation of the subjugation of one form by another. Unlike other performance predecessors or contemporaries who have appropriated or incorporated *kabuki* codes into performance, 2HC discards the universalism of intercultural performance and acknowledges the impossibility and political complexities of hybridity. In this stance we can discern a historiographic framework with which to understand and unravel orientalist fetishization, namely through the simulacrum.

I define *simulacral performance* as performance that weaves a web of referentiality but provides little to no context for inherent cultural meaning and does not attempt to create universal expressions. Simulacral performance makes no claim to sanctity or roots: it plays with the dilemmas and wonders inherent in all performance and experimentation. “East” and “West” are rendered as pastiche or style that is impossible ultimately to define, and therefore simulacral performance can envision and enact unencumbered by expectations fostered by hegemonic structures of power, politics, or capital. Through simulacral performance, 2HC reveals and antagonizes these tautologies of cultural autonomy in its work. Simulacral performance does not take as its base cultural conflict. It does not seek to convey some unique, transcendent form of expression, nor does it grapple with the identity politics at work in an always-already intercultural world.² The language of *kabuki*, for example, is, for the most part, lost in translation for downtown New York theatregoers, and the result is a series of *performance simulacra*, representations that, according to Jean Baudrillard, substitute “the signs of the real for the real,” inevitably leading to “*the radical negation of the sign as value.*”³ The signs the company uses as “*kabuki-like*” are emptied of context and cultural meaning in the name of an aesthetic postcolonial critique. Gone is the pretense of intercultural synthesis; in its place, 2HC draws attention to the impossibility of genre hybridity,

The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf

discarding orientalist notions of the autonomous work of art while creating its own language of pastiche and campy appropriation.

I argue that 2HC, dissatisfied with the fallacy of intercultural utopia, immediately challenges the historical, textual, and formal aspects of staging, for example, a eighteenth-century *kabuki* play by utilizing elements of simulacral performance. *Drum of the Waves of Horikawa* plays out on a square stage that is reminiscent of *nōh* theatre iconography, but the traditional pastoral scene is painted in black and white, and the stage is constructed of contemporary industrial material—steel, plungers, and the like. Many aspects of the performance’s iconography are vaguely adapted from *kabuki* traditions—kimonos, makeup, movement, music (Fig. 1)—but these references are where the appropriation ends. This cavalier appropriation problematizes the production and reception of ostensibly conflicting cultural codes for both the actors exercising this theatrical rite and the audience and its relationship to authenticity, or rather to theatrical artifice. The overlapping codes in costuming, movement, sound, and set gesture toward more nuanced, if almost absurd, confluences and complications. Boots and trench coats alongside kimonos, gongs competing with electric guitars, the defiance of traditional gender lines in casting, even Barbagallo’s resemblance to David Bowie, contribute to the collision and collusion of styles at work in the simulacral performance of 2HC.



Figure 1.

Drum of the Waves of Horikawa. Otane hosts a drinking party to honor the drum teacher Getiton. Punk and *kabuki* aesthetics together. *From left*: David Brooks (masked), Heidi Schreck, Mike Mikos. Photo by Brooke O’Harra.

TRADITION—WITH INNOVATIONS! FROM ORIENTALISM TO THE
SIMULACRAL PERFORMANCE

Mining the orientalist aesthetic has a history and culture as rich as the Age of Empires that fostered it. However, I would like to focus on the more recent history of avant-gardist appropriation because these two strains of discourse are allied not only through their theatrical mobilizations but also through their ideological conflicts. James M. Harding and John Rouse make a valid point about gaps in scholarship and practice:

After more than two decades of postmodern thinkers admonishing us not to think of history without always also thinking about historiography, there is a certain irony in discovering avant-garde studies to be one of the last refuges for conceptions of history grounded in philosophical idealism.⁴

Avant-garde practices still rely consistently on essentialism—of form, expression, and ultimately aesthetic autonomy. I argue that this impulse to create the sense of autonomy in performance contributes to the impulse to fetishize the Other. Of course, the alignment of these impulses immediately nullifies both, and as a result much critical work has focused on keeping these two ideas distanced from each other. Maintaining a narrative of avant-garde history therefore marginalizes orientalist fetishization, allowing our stories of the theatre history canon to evolve into myth: Bertolt Brecht meeting Mei Lanfang at a party in Moscow; Antonin Artaud delighting in Balinese dance at the 1931 Paris Expo. These two encounters led to paradigmatic shifts in thinking and staging performance throughout the twentieth century. And while our contemporary academic sense of progress treats these changes in theories and approaches with some degree of critical awareness, distance, and subtlety, we are not as far removed from earlier orientalist discourse as we may believe. The essentialist desire for tradition and authenticity still haunts our critical faculties and our approaches to devised performance. Explicating the vast structures at work, Edward Said wrote:

Orientalism can be discussed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.⁵

Scholars and performance makers continue to rely on fetishizations of traditions that subjugate the Other in the name of cultural and artistic progress. A double standard is therefore reinforced: responsible and aware critics and artists still use authenticity as a barometer of artistic achievement, even if that authenticity never existed in the first place. For example, UNESCO's attempts to "preserve" intangible artistic practices (an attempt that is itself strongly rooted in orientalism) points to another of Baudrillard's observations: "In order for ethnology to live, its object must die."⁶ Where are the lines to be drawn between

preservation and authenticity and between political awareness and orientalism? How do these lines affect hegemonic systems of cultural appropriation?

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling documents a cultural shift in the perception of what is “authentic,” a move away from artistic concern with the self (Polonius’s “To thine own self be true”), which he categorizes as a desire for sincerity, and toward the creation of art that is detached from individualism and devoid of self-consciousness, writing that “the work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist *wholly by the laws of its own being*, which include the right to embody painful, ignoble, or socially unacceptable subject-matters.”⁷ Art’s autonomy from subjectivity displaces the role of the artist to that of explorer, abject portrayer of truths. The artwork is definitive—authority through autonomy. This matches the appropriation of Eastern forms neatly: oriental forms are not preoccupied with psychological depth or textual concretization (at least, of course, according to Brecht, Artaud, et al.). Rather, they allow the Western performance maker to cast off the shackles of ego in favor of a greater, universal (read: primitive) signification. Artaud retooled gestural form to idealize a Theatre of Cruelty, whereas Brecht simplified gestural codes to create the Epic Theatre. To be fair, both could understand the forms (Balinese dance and Chinese opera, respectively) only through their Western, orientalist lenses, but they created two landmarks in a generally misguided ideology of avant-garde performance.

Trilling is part of this long line of theorists of modernist aesthetics, and the larger social role he assigns to autonomy bears an uncanny resemblance to the roles of the avant-garde as framed by the likes of Renato Poggioli and, in line with the social role of art, Peter Bürger, whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* posited that the abstract sense of the radicalism of the avant-garde required sublation into the social praxis of everyday life.⁸ Bürger’s problematic framework, which assumes that spheres of art, economics, and so forth can be understood discretely, reinscribes and idealizes clean breaks with aesthetic tradition and the totality of the artwork.⁹ He does, however, point to the failure of the historical avant-garde, the very same fallacy that affects his political ideology: “The historical avant-garde movements were unable to destroy art as an institution; but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity.”¹⁰ In other words, avant-garde movements could never exist in a cultural or political vacuum but could uphold a narrative that the work of art existed for its own sake—the work was autonomous from author and audience interactions.

Much as Bürger did, many theorists and practitioners have fallen in line with the ideology of aesthetic purity, cultural integrity, and the promise of a transcendental stage language. The high modernist theories Bürger and Trilling set out are directly connected to the orientalism of performance and, significantly, to how groups such as 2HC are attempting to break away from the problematic politics of interculturalism. The key to the problem is autonomy: the assumption of discrete spheres of cultures, practices, and artworks; the underlying rhetoric that reinforces both avant-gardist breaks in culture and Said’s system of domination. Artists and groups such as Peter Brook, Julie Taymor, Théâtre du Soleil, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and the SITI Company incorporate training and styles

from Eastern countries in an effort to create a unique, universal system of communication and expression. Without due consideration, these artistic practices fall prey to the fallacies of the East–West binary. Steve Tillis criticizes the common assumption that “East” and “West” each constitutes a singular politics, worldview, and aesthetic style. Working from this reductive premise results in a binaristic dominance of West over East, Western vocabularies and aesthetics usurping Eastern styles.¹¹

Experimental performance cannot seem to shake these traces of Jerzy Grotowski’s or Peter Brook’s transcendentalism of the Empty Space via orientalism or Artaud’s and Brecht’s overly simplistic readings. To this day, many experimental performance groups maintain similar simplistic American or Eurocentric aesthetics or stage a multicultural, postcolonial aesthetic that is largely unexamined or uncomplicated by practitioners, critics, or audiences.

This is not to say that the canon or its underlying ideologies must be discarded entirely, but rather that the conflict between cultural appropriation and responsibility should lead to more critical work, such as Daphne Lei’s recent and insightful work on “hegemonic intercultural theatre,” or “HIT”: “a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower and Third World raw material and labor, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions.”¹² Lei advocates a moderate liberalism that acknowledges and works *within* contemporary power structures to establish a more symbiotic relationship between East and West. She examines Robert Wilson’s works staged in Taiwan, *Orlando* (2009) and *1433: The Grand Voyage* (2010), as examples of both failure and success, respectively, in HIT productions. Lei posits that Wilson’s approach to *Orlando* was rigid and intolerant of any aesthetic other than his own, whereas *1433*, perhaps building on the lessons learned from the previous production, was more successful in its flexible cultural dialogue. HIT therefore helps to garner interest in international artistic dialogue and collaboration; provide much-needed exposure for and reinvigoration of classical, sometimes moribund forms; and challenge artists from both camps to broaden their horizons and maintain open minds. These collaborations can coexist with national, political, and aesthetic identities intact, even strengthened, according to Lei.¹³ Although Lei’s formulation is practical and politically savvy, it requires the concerted effort of entire institutions to be tolerant, receptive to outside ideas, and willing to reach out in the name of cultural exchange. For Wilson’s productions in Taiwan, cultural organizations, embassies, theatre companies, critics, and audiences all had to extend themselves to help a single production’s success. Lei acknowledges that HIT becomes even more complicated when it tours.¹⁴ The framework still exists within a narrative of cultural autonomy similar to the out-and-out orientalism of the avant-garde, especially considering that an intervention is necessary, the “*interruption of the interruption of cultural flows.*”¹⁵ Nevertheless, HIT is a grounded and critically responsible framework for performances created from multiple explicit cultures.

But what happens when these performance companies are not touring, are not commissioned to visit international festivals or invite guest artists? What happens when the company makes no attempt to mobilize hybridized forms? This

The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf

postcolonial, postmodern world, which is constantly creating feedback loops of meaning—be it via culture, nation, or some other means—is more akin to Baudrillard’s world of hyperreality, “produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.”¹⁶ To follow Tillis’s East–West fallacy to its logical conclusion, there is no such autonomous culture within so-called intercultural performance. Instead, the simulacrum is revealed as part of the infinite deferral of cultural meanings. This practice is not apolitical; rather, it acknowledges the untenable position of orientalism and the political impossibility of autonomy.

It follows then that the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf must exist in contextual and cultural spheres—downtown New York in the early twenty-first century—but it defies many expectations of the experimental scene. Mobilizing a decidedly unvirtuosic performance style, which augments “Eastern” performance iconography with trash-aesthetic stage designs, low-tech uses of technology such as found televisions and spycams on wooden sticks, and performance techniques that incorporate grotesque puppetry and punk rock, the company brings a sense of play and experimentation to otherwise canonical texts and traditional forms, including the canonized universality that underlies intercultural experiments. This is not to say that 2HC’s performances are unskilled or superficial: on the contrary, their investigations into simulacra have revealed historical and theoretical prejudices that severely limit theatrical possibility. The company works to complicate the monoliths of genealogy and ritual and, by extension, the avant-garde itself by folding conventional classical and experimental tropes in upon themselves.

THE MATRIX OF THE ARCHIVE

The 2HC archive is quite informal; it consists of two manila file folders and a handful of CD-ROMs. Most of it documents conversations between cofounders Brooke O’Harra and Brendan Connelly. The artifacts are printouts and outlines on scrap paper, brainstorming scrawled on newspaper articles, e-mails printed on grant applications, and, most frequently, notes on top of notes on top of notes. Some of the pages are nearly impossible to decipher, English obscuring English, phrases sabotaging syntax, appearing to give the reader and their audiences few clues as to how to approach Eastern performance traditions.

As O’Harra and Connelly toyed with ideas for their first production, *Ubu Roi*, in 1999 and 2000, their messages back and forth exhibited all the energy and audacity of creators of a young theatre company:

“The text teeters on chaos and sometimes we should let it spill out.”

“‘ALL’ chimes in with his/her/it’s [*sic*] line and it’s one big mess but who cares!?? woo-hoo!!”

“I want to rip [*sic*] holes in its history, revealing the inside.”

“I saw the new Foreman play. Wow, he’s my favorite.”

The ostensible purpose of an archive is to document, catalog, and clarify history. However, it is selective, edited, and biased. It is incomplete. These

contradictions, according to Jacques Derrida, actually constitute a promise that the archive “is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.”¹⁷ Two-Headed Calf’s archive seems to offer a direct example of Derrida’s temporal troubling: in its illegibility and obfuscation of the past, it points to the reflexivity of tradition, the impurity of aesthetic accumulation and trajectory, and an investigation into the potential of chaos within order.

How does one use an archive that cannot be read?

As a genealogy of thinkers from Simonides to Derrida have pointed out, the 2HC archive reveals not only a history but a significant paradigm of form, one that reflects the aesthetic of the company: meaning through layering, folding, weaving, blending, and conflating to the point where issues of origin, tradition, and preconception are obscured—performance that wages war over meanings and audiences. 2HC challenges these narratives of progress and paradigm, rendering the culturally sacrosanct, autonomous work untenable. Text cannot be divorced from movement, production cannot be divorced from reception, and no universal mode of communication is in fact possible. The group seems uninterested in maintaining the integrity of each layer but rather revels in the mess of amalgamation and embraces the contradictions and superficialities of collage. This style provides a framework with which they can reevaluate the influence and impact of other forms, simultaneously leveling a critique at the autonomy of cultural forms. In production, Chikamatsu is a punk rocker and George Bernard Shaw crosses the *hanamichi*. Past, present, and future coexist. Their performance is a type of living archive, albeit a relatively violent one: much like the layering of notes, messages, and ideas on paper, 2HC performances are innumerable layered permutations.

2HC’s recipe has served as both boon and bane, and therefore the company occupies a paradoxical position: they are simultaneously lauded for their experimentation and energy and condemned as irresponsible. Critics characterize their work as “frivolous,” “sloppy,” “adulterated,” “overdone,” “half-baked,” “overreaching,” and, most often, “silly.”¹⁸ These reactions are a result of the contextual impossibilities of intercultural critique. Two-Headed Calf does not present at the Japan Society, and they do not make claims to practice *kabuki* training or performance. Most of these American critics are not scholars of forms such as *kabuki* and are not trained or equipped to examine performance that mobilizes or complicates these forms. All of the reviews cited above are from trade publications: newspapers, magazines, and blogs. These publications are meant to serve the select communities who frequent, support, or at times study experimental performance, which in part explains the trope of dismissiveness. But even critics who do have these political and formal faculties, such as Tillis and Lei or Rustom Bharucha, Arjun Appadurai, and Néstor García Canclini, are writing for even more select communities of mostly academics, for whom a lack of identity politics would be at best unfashionable, at worst wildly irresponsible.¹⁹ In other words, even though the mainstream media critics have contributed vital insight and documentation for contemporary audiences and the academic critics have provided invaluable work in examining and destabilizing orientalism, they are all a part of the structure of power and cultural conservation that maintains the dichotomy

between the dominant and subordinate that ultimately serves modernist progressive thought. This lack of context in production and reception fosters an overly simplistic discourse of hybrid codes, making it difficult to move beyond the binaries of orientalism. Despite this environment, 2HC has been able to develop work consistently, garnering support from Ellen Stewart, Vallejo Gantner, and Anne Bogart.²⁰ Why is this?

The company's process, rigor, and style share much with other contemporary companies—including the layering of texts, media work, and what could be considered task-based acting within the tradition of the Theatre of Images²¹—but 2HC's choices of texts and blending of aesthetics has led to a counterproductive string of discourse, an assumption of and bias toward integrity and radicalism that most critics are working with but of which none is aware. 2HC is challenging the stubborn notion of authenticity and the avant-garde's aesthetic mining of universal language via orientalist ritual, most notably in its use of *kabuki*. Their dedication, reflexivity, research, and intricacies, which are arguably more attuned to the complications of hybridity than is the recent contemporary theatre, make them a convenient pariah. They exist in performance No Man's Land, not radical enough to be called "avant-garde" and not accessible or faithful enough to be called "drama" or "intercultural performance." The move away from autonomous or universal meaning through the ritual of performance, a foundational tenet for avant-garde ideology, is precisely what makes 2HC so distinct from its experimental colleagues.

DISPATCHES FROM JAPAN: FORMATION OF TWO-HEADED CALF

The educational experiences of 2HC explain much about their simulacral approach to performance and their aesthetic of pastiche. O'Harra began as an engineering major in her undergraduate work at Lafayette College. She enjoyed acting classes as electives—the playfulness and freedom were a refreshing contrast to the rigor and constriction of her major. O'Harra enjoyed the classes so much that she agreed to be in one of the school's productions. The director gave her sides featuring only her lines rather than a script. This, to an engineering major, was the equivalent of designing a building with no consideration for structural integrity, or omitting plans for indoor plumbing. She had little historical or theoretical context and was armed instead with scientific method, mathematics, and schematics. O'Harra forged ahead with the challenge, and the archaic promptbook methodology left a lasting impression on her and, later, on 2HC's aesthetic: "I just created my own meanings. At the same time, I was doing thermodynamics and differential equations—and so the only way I could put it all together in the rigor of my days was structurally: what was the space, what was the rhythm."²²

As she began to create her own work, a colleague noticed O'Harra's affinity for the nonhierarchical joining of movement, text, and sound and asked her about her experience with Japanese performance styles such as *kabuki* and *nōh*. She had none, although she had studied Japanese since high school and had written her senior undergraduate thesis on the films of Yasujiro Ozu.²³

She decided to continue her education and got a job through the Japanese Consulate in the Ministry of Education, working in Japan for two years while simultaneously restructuring curricula and immersing herself in *kabuki* and *butoh* performances, reading every book she could find on the subject and seeing performances every week. She was also trying to fill the gaps in theatrical theory in her education by reading the likes of Artaud, Brook, and Grotowski and taking copious notes. She was fascinated by the different champions of body- and gesture-based performance and by how well these ideas resonated with conventional ideas of the symbolisms conveyed by Japanese acting styles.²⁴ Of particular interest to her was the alignment of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty ("Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt")²⁵ and *kabuki's zankoku no bi*, or aesthetics of cruelty, of which Samuel Leiter writes: "In *kabuki*, beauty and cruelty go hand in hand and, no matter how intense, pain and fear are never presented for their own sakes."²⁶ The combination of Japanese conventions and Artaud's dissatisfaction with Western convention provided a foundation on which O'Harra based much of her work.

During this collision of disciplines, O'Harra met Connelly, a musician and composer, while both were pursuing graduate studies at Tulane University in 1997. They were working on a production of *Woyzeck* as props mistress and sound designer, respectively. Their conversations about form and tradition led to a number of collaborations, including *The Maids* (1998) and *Punch and Judy* (1999). A workshop for The Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, New York, during the summer of 1999 solidified the working relationship. Since then, they have maintained a roster of regular performers, designers, and musicians whose ability to venture beyond the group and return with other influences, experiences, and skills only reinforces the distinction between 2HC and other troupes that operate with the more insular modernist paradigm.

The group's process takes its cue from O'Harra's first prompt-sheet foray into theatre, beginning from individual experiences and encounters with the text. Much like 2HC's most direct predecessor, The Wooster Group, the text serves as a vehicle for the group to explore the associations of the company of actors and musicians, which extend to the atmosphere, not the meaning, of the piece. They layer and collage the images and movements the performers imagine in order to push the text beyond its conventional, autonomous primacy. The rehearsals work as an artistic echo chamber, ideas and movement, sound and music chaotically bouncing off one another to create a contemporary, visceral experience of an otherwise mummified text, concrete textuality serving as an imposition to the processual art of collaborative performance, the fixed text that Artaud railed against in "No More Masterpieces."²⁷ Actors explore movements and vocal oddities, at once informing and reacting to the musicians, a rotating company that has included young, exciting performers and composers, many from the Manhattan School of Music and some from the postpunk band the Zs. Their noisy and reflexive experiments in sound waver between John Cage and Sonic Youth, complementing 2HC's propensity for raw, stylized gesture. The freedom of full involvement, the abandon of the simulacral performance, has led to the controlled chaos with

which 2HC challenges the audience and the confrontation with othered theatrical codes.

IMPURITY FROM PURE FORM: WITKACY FROM TOKYO

While working in Tokyo in 1995, O’Harra met Professor Daniel Gerould at a theatre conference. Gerould, a scholar and translator of Stanisław Witkiewicz, suggested that the playwright might be of interest to O’Harra. Certainly Witkiewicz’s essays resonated with O’Harra’s interest in radical theatrical language. Witkiewicz wrote:

In my opinion, beyond certain limits set by aesthetic considerations, the material used should be of no concern to us, since for the immediate “betterment” of mankind we have special institutions: the churches and the schools. I think that the social significance of the theater could be infinitely enhanced if it ceased being a place for taking a fresh look at life, for teaching and for expounding “views,” and instead became a true temple for experiencing pure metaphysical feelings.²⁸

Consequently, 2HC’s earliest performances were of texts by Witkiewicz: *The Madman and the Nun* (2000), *Tumor Brainiowicz* (2002), and *The Mother* (2003). Discovering an avant-garde Polish playwright from the 1920s in 1990s Japan may seem a bit strange on the surface, but Witkiewicz’s innumerable writings on Pure Form encapsulate and resonate with classical Japanese theatres on very basic (and, I acknowledge, reductive) levels: text is deemphasized and is given equal footing with each element of performance such as sound, movement, color, and action; utterances drive the performance, but only as much as lighting does; text is an aesthetic medium, and its volume, cadence, and timbre require as much attention as the narrative. Both Pure Form and Japanese styles such as *kabuki* seek some sort of metaphysical transcendence through exaggeration, repetition, fantasy, and the grotesque. Both vehemently oppose the traditional theatre in favor of an active and manic world not bound by earthly rules.

Witkiewicz, though concerned with his ideal of “metaphysical feeling,” raged against the artifice and suffocating effects of tradition: “We do not understand that a work of Art is what it is and nothing else, since we have grown accustomed to think that Art is the expression of some kind of real-life content, the expression of some real or fantastic worlds, *something that has value only when compared to something else of which it is the reflection.*”²⁹

And while *kabuki* might be steeped in tradition and ritual, its history is also a series of challenges to convention and imitations of the supernatural, not to mention a concern with the gesture in service of all other elements. Seventeenth-century *kabuki* writer and actor Ichikawa Danjūrō I created a “rough” acting style (*aragoto*) to exaggerate the supernatural atmosphere of the performance, and he supposedly based performance movements on Buddhist guardian statues, extricating religious symbology for the profane arts.³⁰ This continued to evolve into what Leonard

C. Pronko discusses as the *kabuki* actor as hieroglyph, embodying “reality (actor), sign (character), and symbol (visual and aural resonances) all at once”:

The *kabuki* performer, dancer-singer-actor, in violent contrast to his Western counterpart, is permitted to use all his bodily and vocal resources, disciplined according to traditional patterns. Clad in nonrealistic costumes, often highly fanciful, with generous padding, platform shoes, immense wigs, colorful makeup, the actor moves in carefully designed, dynamic patterns in order to suggest the essence of a character. Speaking in a deep voice, or in falsetto, or on the break between the two, rising to a high pitch, falling to a low, interspersing words with grunts, muffled sounds, the actor creates the aural *impression* of his character rather than an imitation.³¹

Thus, the highly stylized work of both Witkiewicz and *kabuki* deemphasize content in favor of form. Both were strong reactions to the conventions of the day, and both celebrate and exploit the slippage of meaning through repetition. What separates Witkiewicz from other oriental fetishists in performance history is his more distanced associations: rather than explicitly referencing and idealizing any particular Eastern form of performance, he theorized Pure Form while he was stationed in Russia during a furious period of avant-garde production. At best, Eastern forms may have trickled through from numerous permutations of aesthetic interpretation, but Pure Form served no explicit geographical ancestry (other than, of course, Witkiewicz’s own). This constellation of Witkiewicz, *kabuki*, and contemporary devised theatre fostered the 2HC style of working within and against these various essentialized forms, which means that they acknowledge no autonomy, no pure or universal language.

STANDARD DEVIANCE: RIPPING *KABUKI*

O’Harra dispensed with the fetishization of Eastern technique that her textual mentors Artaud, Brook, and Grotowski displayed. The pseudoreligious universality each theorist proselytized now seemed to her shortsighted at best and racist at worst. O’Harra has described the revelation: “It would be embarrassing for us to pretend to be doing Kabuki. Real Kabuki performers train for ten years.”³² But “pretending” to do *kabuki* is in fact what they do.

In 2004, 2HC made a significant shift from the work of Witkiewicz, whose plays offer much of the abstraction and play the company enjoyed, to classic, canonical texts—those by Henry Fielding, George Bernard Shaw, and Monzaemon Chikamatsu, for example—in order further to explore methods of layering and colliding style, genre, and meaning. For this cross-breeding O’Harra returned to her Japanese influences, and a *kabuki* aesthetic began to take root and entwine with otherwise traditional performance elements.

Roughly translated, *kabuki* means “bizarre,” so to combine this particular code with “literary drama” is an exercise in disjuncture and semiotic violence. The characters constantly alternate between what O’Harra describes as a “natural state,” or typical Western naturalist acting, and an “articulated stance,” which

The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf

adapts manic, stylized *kabuki* performance. The result reveals both astonishing resonances and rifts between the two styles and a wealth of additional layers of meaning within old texts. This dichotomy of styles is striking: moments or entire scenes are repeated in entirely distinct styles, and eventually this distinction begins to break down—structurally, aesthetically, stylistically—so that the division between “natural” and “articulated” is blurred almost entirely.

The *kabuki* aesthetic 2HC uses in their performances is not actually *kabuki code*. It is an adaptation that uses the aesthetic *style* of the Japanese form: flowing costumes, vocal intonations with swift alternations between high and low registers, strong physicality and gestures, and music that accentuates and drives the text. The very rhythm of the piece emulates *kabuki*'s rhythmic atmosphere, using moments such as *mie*, the one-two-three pose, reinforced with percussion to punctuate a dramatic moment. An example is the use of percussion during Yougayman's preparation for defiling Otane. The result is *kabuki-like*: not the symbology of *kabuki*'s feel, its authentic form, but rather the feel of the feel. It is a style that imitates a style: simulacral *kabuki*.

The responses of critics and audiences to these *kabuki*-infused productions reveal a significant bias: the assumption that performance must result in heads *or* tails. One critic wrote, “In theory, the fusion works, but sadly in this practice it does not.” Another said, “The punk spirit keeps things light and fast, but mostly works at cross purposes with Chikamatsu's play, which seems more burlesqued than illuminated by the encounter.”³³ All dialectics, no synthesis.

Another aspect of this production–reception relationship can be explained by something much more basic than intercultural discourse—theatrical difference itself. *Kabuki* serves as a stark contrast to the naturalistic performance that commonly serves as the default in performances of Shaw and even Chikamatsu in Western productions. The texts are foregrounded as foreign and bizarre in order to draw closer attention to these canonized scripts and conventional theatre forms. Rethinking the presentation of such performance brings one back to the text to reveal not only its eloquence but also the play's imperfections and internal contradictions, especially when the convention of the text's primacy is part and parcel of the discourse.

2HC's simulacral style complements and complicates the text further in two significant ways. First, the abruptness and staccato of *kabuki*, both physically and aurally, is a corollary to the violence of the action in all of these texts. The formal and physical violence works constantly to undermine conventional notions of religion, economics, and politics and the way that all of these are inevitably tied to the violence of artistic creation, a theme 2HC explored in its work with Witkiewicz. Second, the folding in of different styles, such as Shaw and *kabuki*, both of which are considered to be formally conservative and autonomous, discards any sense of allegiance to Pure Form or the canon, let alone the tradition of *kabuki* itself, and offers opportunities for unique experimentation. Here is where one can see most clearly the group's breakdown of autonomy—of text, of style, of culture. The forms at play, such as Western texts or Eastern styles, are not discrete units; nor can these units be combined or blended or even hybridized. Simulacral performance recognizes these impossibilities.

Theatre Survey

In 2HC's production of Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (2004), physical action was heightened and stylized in a way that was new for the company. Connelly "translated" the original text into a percussive nonsense language the company called "Tuber." Vowels turned into sirens, consonants were trilled and stuttered. Dramatic episodes were repeated for both dramatic effect and additional perspective. The company had begun its foray into pidgin-*kabuki*.

Their next New York production, Shaw's *Major Barbara*, was performed at La MaMa in 2006 and brought the ideas set out in *Tom Thumb* to a new level. O'Harra began exploring how to approach Japanese texts from a Western acting methodology in her classes at NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing, where she began teaching in 2004 and workshoping *Tom Thumb*. Connelly began to let the simulacra of *kabuki* music and sound, including the rhythm and use of gongs, wood beaters, and drums, infiltrate the performance's diagnosis. In addition to Connelly's music, vivid makeup and costumes (such as somewhat-traditional kimonos and fans) accompanied Shaw's text. But in fact they weren't Japanese at all (Fig. 2). And this is what some critics found objectionable.³⁴

While many critics pointed to the company's clear sense of discipline, energy, and love for the performance, analysis of form and content was limited. Shaw is Shaw, *kabuki* is *kabuki*, and never the twain shall meet. Or as Robert



Figure 2.

Major Barbara. The company at the munitions factory. Photo by Adair Iacono.

Simonson posed it, “The first [Shaw] sits almost wholly above the neck and the latter [*kabuki*] is more interested in the way words sound than what they have to say,”³⁵ a binary that aligns almost precisely with Said’s theorized tradition of Western orientalism.

But in fact, the themes of *Major Barbara* resonate greatly with 2HC’s layering of styles. As Shaw writes, “[Barbara’s] discovery is that she is her father’s accomplice; that the Salvation Army is the accomplice of the distiller and the dynamite maker; they can no more escape one another than they can escape the air they breathe.”³⁶ They are inextricable, just as language and physicality are inextricable from their arbitrariness in the creation of meaning, just as the ostensibly two different cultures at work in performances such as *Major Barbara* are in fact more intertwined and interactive, part of a matrix of cultures that produce always-already indefinite meaning.

2HC’s realization of this matrix is staged in Act 2, which the company performed in the stairwell landing of La MaMa, the space of conflict between the worlds of the performance and reality. The conflict of the upper echelon of British society of Undershaft and Barbara and the lower class of Rummy and Snobby is the most fraught of the piece. On a relatively small landing one flight below the theatre space, the cast performed on the Salvation Army set—a simple arrangement of benches and a few old televisions that broadcast receptions from the spycams (a stark contrast to the amazing ironwork set constructed in the cavernous La MaMa Annex space).

It is here where Shaw’s linguistic biases shine through most strongly, augmented by 2HC’s shift in performance space. The transliteration of the Cockney accent in the dramatic text is Shaw’s distinct way of othering the lower class. Writing on his “expertise” for *The Morning Leader* in 1901, Shaw remarked, “I am no expert phonetician; but I have heard a great deal of Cockney eloquence from speakers of all classes during the past quarter century; and I have listened to it not only as a politician listens, but as a playwright and a critic, both musical and dramatic, listens. Hence my ‘amusing tone of authority’ on the subject.”³⁷ Shaw paradoxically positions himself in this passage as the privileged, objective linguist while simultaneously not an expert per se but merely the simulacrum of one. Shaw writes the lower-class dialect as a part of British culture but as simultaneously foreign in the very way Western intercultural styles use Eastern traditions as a/part. The bleeding of cultural spheres in Shaw’s text is refracted by the bleeding of aesthetics in 2HC’s production. Here is where 2HC cleverly deconstructs the cult of autonomy, waging a ruthless aesthetic battle.

The dominance of character and narrative in *Tom Thumb* and of politics and language in *Major Barbara* and the obfuscation of these elements readied the company for their production of Chikamatsu’s *Drum of the Waves of Horikawa* (*Horikawa nami no tsuzumi*), a 1705 *kabuki* play. While *kabuki* was initially a renegade form—James R. Brandon called it “the rock entertainment of the 17th century”³⁸—it is now considered to be mainstream Japanese theatre. In a beautiful twist of trajectory, the *kabuki* aesthetic has become the convention and therefore a good subject for 2HC. Maintaining the faux-Japanese aesthetic established in *Major Barbara*, O’Harra sent actors home to watch videos and YouTube clips

of 1970s punk rock concerts—the Slits, Iggy and the Stooges, the Germs, Siouxi and the Banshees. These were the movements she wanted them to follow to a T. Thus, the wild flailing and posing of *kabuki* became inflected with the wild flailing and posing of punk. After so many misconceptions surrounding the *kabuki* influence in *Barbara*, the company decided to muddy the waters even more instead of simplifying or bracketing the aesthetic elements.

As with 2HC's reinterpretation of Shaw, the audience reads conflict between two important forms, neither of which is authentic in the world of the performance. (This reminds one of Bürger's assertion that artistic institutions stabilize the conditions they protest.)³⁹ Both forms add myriad meanings to the drama of the samurai saga, which features drinking, adultery, rape, vengeance, and murder. Family honor echoes street cred, and action and rhythm speak louder than words. In a sense, the recklessness of punk has been a part of 2HC's aesthetic from the beginning, especially its disavowal of gravitas or bourgeois values, particularly those that espouse an aesthetic integrity.

The outlandish frivolity of *Drum of the Waves* brings 2HC's brash experimentation to the fore, flaunting the company's obvious disdain for the sanctity of Pure Form and autonomy. The action is played out in a simple boxing ring constructed of toilet plungers and string, vaguely gesturing to a *nōh* stage. But 2HC foregoes stoic meditative movements and spiritual themes for a more profane aesthetic, one of the simulacrum. The set is a battleground framing a struggle to come to terms with diluted, impure form that volleys back and forth between absurd punk anthems beaten into microphones and exaggerated bowlegged and cross-eyed *kabuki* poses (Fig. 3). The silliness spills over to the front-of-house concessions, where Connelly as bandleader hawks beer and sake, and in the superficially offensive character names—Ogah Hecouldkillyou, Eesogay Yougayman. The reactionary response in reviews such as Reed's, who wrote, "At the end of nearly two and a half hours, I felt like I had been assaulted, and walked out of the theater half-deaf,"⁴⁰ illustrates discomfort with the hybridity and layered styles 2HC embraces and resonates with the traditional and bourgeois sensibilities that spawned the reactionary *kabuki* and punk genres. Perhaps detractors are put off by the punk spirit that Stooges drummer Scott Asheton summed up as "Fuck all this shit, we're dirt, we don't care."⁴¹ But it's not that simple. The production is 2HC's attempt to reclaim for performance a sense of humor or, more accurately, humility. Hegemonic institutions have not been destroyed, as Bürger claimed, and through the simulacral staging, the company mobilizes a contemporary literacy that acknowledges that these cultures, politics, and styles necessarily coexist.

The theories of orientalizing transcendentalists do not speak to twenty-first-century audiences well versed in advertising, the cult of celebrity, and the superficiality of politics. The company puts on no airs, finds no paradigmatic solution or discovery, makes no clean breaks. To claim otherwise, to stage Pure Form, is to objectify it and, in Baudrillard's terms, immediately arrest that which is being experimented with and/or observed. The static and indexical methodology of historical narrative presupposes that the object comes into existence only after undergoing the experimenter's scrutiny. The simulacral performance



Figure 3.

Drum of the Waves of Horikawa. The final confrontation between Ogah Hecouldkillyou and Getiton. *From left:* Tatiana Pavela, Nadia Mahdi, Mike Mikos, David Brooks, Heidi Schreck (masked). Photo by Brooke O’Harra.

therefore makes no claim to achieving intercultural form and thus can work beside orientalist, avant-gardist discourse.

CONCLUSION: IMPURITY TO IMPOSSIBILITY TO IMPLOSION

And so it seems that O’Harra and company have come full circle from the director’s days of finding her footing in Japan while studying the high modernists of Western performance. Gone is the belief that metaphysical transcendence is achievable or even desirable in performance, and Eastern fetishism is exposed as impossible at best and a reinscription of false historiographic consciousness at worst. Two-Headed Calf is making a strong gesture toward the inevitability of breakdown. The collision of text, performers, directors, and audiences points to the idea that performance is always already an exercise in futility, that intent, meaning, and reception are a trifecta of false consciousness, and that any attempt to claim otherwise is vanity. Two-Headed Calf is not an irresponsible company creating bastard-child performance styles with no regard for meaning. On the contrary, they are working with the utmost sense of understanding and humility in the creation of performance. Their simulacral performance offers an alternative understanding of conventional orientalist discourse, working outside modernist notions of cultural and aesthetic autonomy, in distinction from so many other contemporaries who maintain that intercultural performance may lead to new, holistic, and universal forms of expression.

The incongruities that the simulacral performance produces are an example of the larger cultural and linguistic gaps within the global community and the severe privileging of Western thought, even within experimental performance. At the same time, they emphasize the foreignness or exoticism of the performance canon to the contemporary audience. The doubling back of these styles illustrates the performance community's anxiety over the loss of avant-garde autonomy and, on a larger scale, the collapse of authenticity itself. Much theory in recent decades has pointed to the production of meaning and the logical extension that meaning is inherently deferred, manufactured through an infinite web of reproduction and mimicry.⁴²

This deferment of meaning does not mean that rich traditions such as *kabuki*, even those staged in the West, are obsolete or void of meaning. Rather, the attempt to escape the hegemonic structures of orientalism and aesthetic autonomy through simulacral performance allows an infinite number of new frameworks, styles, and political potentialities to emerge. Those executed by Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf continue to rip holes in history, celebrating the simulacrum and deconstruction of orientalist fallacies.

ENDNOTES

1. Stanisław Witkiewicz, "A Few Words about the Role of the Actor in the Theatre of Pure Form," in *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: Seven Plays*, trans. and ed. Daniel Gerould (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2004), 383–8, at 388.

2. The departure from identity or community politics further separates 2HC from other New York-based contemporaries, such as the Civilians, International WOW, Young Jean Lee, or Troika Ranch. Many experimental companies are working with simulacral performance, such as the patron saint The Wooster Group and Radiohole, The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, and Temporary Distortion; but 2HC has thus far been the company saddled with the responsibility for interculturalism.

3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1982; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2, 6; Baudrillard's italics.

4. James M. Harding and John Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 12.

5. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

6. Baudrillard, 7.

7. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 99–100; my italics.

8. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 51.

9. See Jochen Schulte-Sasse's "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde" in Bürger, vii–xlvii, at xiii.

10. Bürger, 87.

11. Steve Tillis, "East, West, and World Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 20.1 (2003): 71–87. From here, since I am in agreement with Tillis, I self-consciously use terms such as East and West for the practical purposes of common vocabulary, particularly critical vocabulary, and for an understanding that East and West in simulacral performances follow the lines of postmodern pastiche.

12. Daphne P. Lei, "Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson's HIT Productions in Taiwan," *Theatre Journal* 63.4 (2011): 571–86, at 571.

The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf

13. *Ibid.*, 584.
14. *Ibid.*, 586–7.
15. *Ibid.*, 574; Lei's italics.
16. Baudrillard, 2.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz ([French orig., 1995] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.
18. David Cote, "Drum of the Waves of Horikawa," *Time Out New York*, 1–7 November 2007; Robin Reed, "Drum of the Waves of Horikawa," *nytheatre.com*, 27 October 2007; Helen Shaw, "A 'Major' Achievement," *New York Sun*, 17 January 2006; Andrea Stevens, "Shaw's Skewers, Kabuki-Style," *New York Times*, 18 January 2006; Daniel Mufson, "All Thumbs: Henry Fielding's Tom Thumb, Fried and with Lots of Butter," *Village Voice*, 18 May 2004; Steve Luber, "My Kingdom for a Potato!" *OffOffOnline.com*, 13 May 2004; Rachel Saltz, "Adultery, Blood, Guts and Samurai," *New York Times*, 1 November 2007.
19. For invaluable work on interculturalism, aesthetics, and the problems of modernity, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press [Hanover, NH: UPNE], 2000); and Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López ([Spanish orig., 1989] Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
20. George Hunka, "Shaw, Kabuki, Eva Peron: The Usual Mix," *New York Times*, 25 June 2006.
21. Bonnie Marranca, *The Theatre of Images* (1977; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
22. Inna Giter, "From Thermodynamics to Theater," *Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf's Narrow Sheet* #1 (March 2003): 1.
23. Yasujiro Ozu (1903–63) has been called "the most Japanese of Japanese directors" because of his aesthetic of *shomin-geki*, or "home drama," which emphasizes the everyday life of the Japanese lower middle class. Examples include films such as *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949) and *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953). See Donald Richie, *The Major Works of Yasujiro Ozu* (New York: New Yorker Films, 1974), 5.
24. See Leonard C. Pronko, "Kabuki: Signs, Symbols, and the Hieroglyphic Actor," in *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance*, ed. Samuel L. Leiter (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 238–52.
25. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards ([French orig., 1938] New York: Grove Press, 1958), 85.
26. Samuel L. Leiter, *Frozen Moments: Writings on Kabuki, 1966–2001* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Program, 2002), 110.
27. Antonin Artaud, "No More Masterpieces," in *Theatre and Its Double*, 74–83.
28. Stanisław Witkiewicz, *The Witkiewicz Reader*, trans. and ed. Daniel Gerould (London: Quartet Books, 1992), 148.
29. *Ibid.*, 149–50; emphasis added.
30. *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, ed. James R. Brandon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 148.
31. Pronko, 241, 243.
32. Helen Shaw, "Pretty in Punk," *Time Out New York*, 25–31 October 2007.
33. Reed; Saltz.
34. See Stevens.
35. Robert Simonson, "Major Barbara," *Time Out New York*, 19–25 January 2006.
36. George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan, Major Barbara, Androcles and the Lion* (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), 193.

Theatre Survey

37. George Bernard Shaw, *George Bernard Shaw on Language*, ed. and annot. Abraham Tauber (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), 23.
38. Brandon, 147.
39. Bürger, 11.
40. Reed.
41. Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 74.
42. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia [2]*, trans. Brian Massumi ([French orig., 1980] Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass ([French orig., 1967] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi ([French orig., 1979] Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).