Participatory (Syn)Aesthetics

This chapter explores a range of work whose practices draw upon the current vogue for what has been defined variously in the context of art and performance as ‘collaborative’, ‘interactive’, ‘immersive’ and ‘participatory.’ Although it might be argued that all applied theatre is participatory (and this is identified in Part I as a principle of applying performance), the focus on the participant’s experience through the form of the work brings it into dialogue with Machon’s ‘(syn)aesthetics’, a ‘redefining’ of visceral performance (Machon, 2009). This body of work, Machon explains, is impossible to define as a genre, due to the fluidity of forms explored but its style ‘places emphasis on the human body’ as well as the verbal as a ‘visceral’ act; it is ‘sensate’ and often ‘transgressive’ as ‘its very form can produce a response in the individual audience member that goes beyond the discourse of critical analysis’ its inarticulacy being ‘due to the fact that the act of immediate perception is primarily located in the body’ (2009: 2).

This ‘(syn)aesthetic style she associates with productions such as Theatre de Complicite’s Street of Crocodiles (1992), De la Guarda’s form of ‘shock’ theatre in pieces such as Villa! Villa! (1998), Pina Bausch’s Bluebeard (1984) and DV8’s Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men (1990), as well as play texts such as Churchill’s The Skriker (1994), Beckett’s Not I (1972) and the corporeal writing of Sarah Kane. Machon identifies three ‘performance strategies’ as key features of the (syn)aesthetic performance style: the ‘(syn)aesthetic hybrid’, which she defines in relation to Richard Wagner’s gesamtkunstwerk (or ‘total artwork’); a ‘pre dominance of the actual body as text in performance’; and an experimentation with ‘writerly speech to establish a visceral-verbal playtext’ (4). Here, her emphasis is on the Kantian, ludic nature of play (discussed in Part I), in conjunction with a Steinian linguistic jouissance where sound and syntax create a nonsensical visceral form of orality. These three elements, however, are present in different combinations and emphases in (syn)aesthetic performance which may not always incorporate all three.
Machon’s case studies are wide ranging, encompassing theatre, dance, live art, site-sympathetic work and ‘technological performance practice’ and includes the UK companies Punchdrunk, Shunt Theatre Collective, Graeae, Bodies in Flight and Curious. The ‘(syn)aesthetic style’ can, however, also be applied to a range of work in international contexts, including many of the case studies in Di Benedetto’s study of contemporary sensual theatre: the work of Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, Societas Raffaello Sanzio and performance artists such as Franco B, Karen Finley and Marina Abramovic, to name but a few, all of whom produce work which is visceral and corporeal in form, content and response. As Machon’s study acknowledges, ‘(syn)aesthetic work shifts between performance disciplines’, and, as I discuss below, there are synergies with work produced by visual artists seeking to move beyond the gallery and to involve the viewer or attendant in experiential practice. Indeed, much of this work is situated in spaces between disciplines as it resists codification and ‘explodes established forms and concepts’ (Machon, 2009: 4). Perhaps the central feature conjoining this body of work is its simultaneous engagement with the turn to both spectatorship and to affect. Above all, the work seeks to produce what Machon describes as an ‘innate’ response, in ‘performance and appreciation’ creating what she refers to as a ‘transcendent quality’. Her analysis (like Di Benedetto’s study of a similar body of work) draws on neuroscientific research as a means to ‘find a discourse for experiential performance events, which articulates both the approach to practice as well as the methods of appreciation that occur in the experience of that work, for practitioners and audience members alike’ (3; my emphasis).

In using the term (syn)aesthesia, however (albeit with a playful parenthesis to distinguish her term from the condition, as such, and to emphasize the fusion between the ‘aesthetics’ of performance and ‘the fused nature of visceral perception’ (7)), Machon’s vocabulary interacts with another and contradictory set of associations – the synthetic. Whilst the practices defined as ‘visceral performance’ by Machon and others (Fenemore, 2003) are often discussed in relation to concepts of authenticity or the ‘real’ of experiential modes of art, the turn to participation through, for example, ‘immersive’ environments is also subject to a critique as an artificial, manufactured, consumerist product, reducing art to a series of cheap (or expensive) simulated thrills. So, for practitioners who apply these modes of performance, there are risks; the integrity of the work can be seriously compromised, as is evident in the work featured below in section 6.2 (‘theme park hells’). At the other end of the spectrum, however, there are significant rewards in the treasures of the practices featured in my final section (‘a taste of heaven’).