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*Institutional Theatrics: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall
Berlin* by Brandon Woolf (review)

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Theatre Journal, Volume 75, Number 4, December 2023, pp. 579-580 (Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2023.a922233>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Gwyneth Shanks, Editor

INSTITUTIONAL THEATRICALS: PERFORMING ARTS POLICY IN POST-WALL BERLIN. By Brandon Woolf. Performance Works. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021; pp. 280.

Brandon Woolf's *Institutional Theatricals: Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin* investigates theatre that addresses and would transform the institutions that house it and the infrastructures that support it. In sum, the book proposes "a negative art of institutional dis/avowal [through which] an institution might embrace its own determinate negation [and] reckon with the particulars of its own contradictions" (14-15). Across the book's chapters, this initial definition (a paraphrase of Theodor Adorno) develops as a subtle tool for theorizing the ways in which performance can directly and substantially participate in the making and executing of policy.

Woolf begins to elaborate this idea in his Introduction, arguing "performance functions as a performative art of policy" (20). This novel reversal of the conventional performance studies assertion that public policy is performative offers new coordinates from which to investigate, "performance's potential to utilize the public institutions of its support to reimagine those very institutions from within" (23). The introduction begins with recent history: the protests, debates, and occupation that followed the announcement that Chris Dercon, then curator at London's Tate Modern museum, would take over as the new director of the Volksbühne theater in the fall of 2017. Woolf's account of these events models the methodology employed throughout the book: rigorous and detailed archival investigations combined with strategic and illuminating instances of participant observation and original interviews with key figures.

The work is organized into two parts: "State-Stages" and "Free-Scenes." Each part is composed of two chapters; the first chapter sets the stage for the "particular policy problematic" (21) in question,

and the second offers a case study of performance as policy. Chapter 1 begins with the closure of the State-Stage Complex and follows the policy debates that ensued as they moved between parliamentary sessions, backroom negotiations, public press reports, and performances throughout the Complex. For Woolf, this history is "a springboard and strategic counterpoint—a site of dis/avowal—for the chapters that follow" (31). Though rife with moments in which key participants and their performances flirted with modes of infrastructural reimagining, the events of 1993 did not produce the same art of institutional dis/avowal apparent in subsequent cases.

Chapter 2 provides the first such counterpoint, Frank Castorf's 2012 production *Lehrstück*. "Re-functioning" emerges in the chapter as a critical conceptual refinement of institutional dis/avowal. Building on Bertolt Brecht's efforts to "refunction the theatre apparatus itself," the book argues that Castorf in turn refunctioned Brecht, "to imagine, and subsequently enact, a new kind of public—and publicly supported—theatre in post-wall Berlin" (68-69). What emerges is "an art of dis/avowal that leans into systems of support" to undo them (86). As Castorf has put it in interviews, "Especially if you are funded through tax money [...] you have the duty to be subversive. You have to be ungrateful" (86). This approach neither acquiesces to the compromises implicit in working within institutions nor refuses participation in institutionalized systems of support. It accepts the institution, warts and all, as a structural element to be played with, to be challenged even as it is embraced.

Part Two shifts focus slightly from institutions to the infrastructures of support undergirding them, and especially the infrastructures constituting Berlin's free-scene of independent artists and ensembles. Chapter 3 introduces these infrastructures via an investigation of "the ways performance and memory animate public institutions" (107), specifically the Palast der Republik, the former seat of the East German Parliament. Drawing on Shannon

Jackson and debates between Jacques Derrida and the architect Daniel Libeskind, Woolf asks, “how might a performance institution dis/avow itself by embracing the temporal disjunction of the spectral?” (115). He finds his answer in a group of artists who proposed temporary artistic interventions in the space, the *Zwischennutzung* initiative, which refused “restorative nostalgia” in favor of a “reflective nostalgia [...] that longs for a ‘future that went missing in the past rather than for a past which never had a future’” (121, quoting Peter Thompson). This figure further refines institutional dis/avowal as an opportunity to engage in “subjunctive (infra) structural imagining” (126).

Chapter 4 continues this discussion of the role of the free-scene in a detailed case study of andcompany&Co.’s (*Coming*) *Insurrection*, a case that offers an example of “performing policy post-dramatically” (135). The 2012 performance, which refunctioned texts by Friedrich Schiller and radical-left tracts, “track[ed] the infrastructural politics of Berlin’s free-scene through an immanent critique of recent activist initiatives on its behalf” (141). The chapter directly addresses a question that bubbles throughout the book: to what extent do the critiques proffered by artists in the midst of these policy debates become “neatly recuperated by the ‘new spirit’ of neoliberal capital” (152). Tentative resolution appears in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s distinction between an aesthetics of insurrection and an aesthetics of resistance. Lehmann privileges the latter, and argues that andcompany&Co. “performs this resistant glance” (164), an aesthetics Woolf elaborates as an “infrastructural redeployment, or refunctioning, of precarity as organized network” imported into “the heart of the institution itself” (174, quoting Paolo Virno).

At a few key moments in the book, Woolf notes that “an American reader might guffaw when hearing” of the scale of German state subsidies to the arts even despite the cuts that led to the vitriolic debates *Institutional Theatrics* chronicles (151). I admit to being one such American, but I am excited to take up this theory amid my guffaws. Where might this “robust theory and practice of ‘institutional aesthetics’” (179) be used to interrogate institutions beyond Germany? What would an aesthetics of institutional dis/avowal look like for companies at work in American regional theatres, at major institutions like The Kennedy Center, or addressing a tax code ostensibly designed to encourage private giving to the arts? *Institutional Theatrics* offers new ways to conceive the modes in which performance may participate in the (re)functioning of policy. Woolf’s institutional dis/avowal builds directly on Shannon Jackson’s interest in “infrastructural avowal” (20) to expand the range of complex relationships

that might emerge between art works and their structures of support, adding nuance to the study of political art.

Institutional Theatrics will be most useful to graduate courses and scholarship that approach performance and politics through the lens of public policy, the law, and our political institutions. The theory it proposes remains quite applicable beyond the cultural policy debates that compose its cases. For my own part, writing this review at a public institution that has begun dismantling its diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and offices in order to comply with recently adopted state laws, I am also energized by the opportunity it provides to think anew about making art about policy within an infrastructure of support one would dis/avow.

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DREAM PROJECTS IN THEATRE, NOVELS AND FILMS: THE WORKS OF PAUL CLAUDEL, JEAN GENET, AND FEDERICO FELLINI. By Yehuda Moraly, translated by Melanie Florence. Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2021; pp. 171.

Dream Projects is about works of which artists can only dream. Works that remain forever unrealized. Works that are abandoned or destroyed. Yehuda Moraly’s premise, rooted in the work of three of the great artists of the twentieth century—Paul Claudel, Jean Genet, and Federico Fellini—is that while these dream works in and of themselves remain eternally inexpressible, they make possible the remainder of the artist’s oeuvre, for which they become the key.

By consulting authors’ notes, drafts, and letters, and examining the testimonies of those with whom they collaborated, Moraly painstakingly reconstructs the abandoned projects “from the birth of the idea through its ripening to the different versions of the project and then to its abandonment, or sometimes its abandonments since the author may come back to the project from a different angle before leaving it once more” (6). Significantly, Moraly deploys the uncompleted works as a prism through which to re-evaluate each artist’s entire oeuvre, meaning that his study is of interest to specialists and non-specialists engaging with any aspect of the three artists’ works.

Chapter 1 examines the fourth part that Claudel intended to add to his *Coûfontaine* trilogy, which was to be a dialogue between a Jewish mother Pensée, her daughter Sarah, and the Pope’s nephew, Orian. Perhaps the fact that Claudel never resolved