

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Continuing the Conversation on the Role of Performance Criticism...

by Meg Foley

In light of media that is now not so new, but is increasingly ubiquitous--Facebook, Twitter, blogging, accessing periodicals online--the conversation about the future of performance criticism and publication continues. Artists and presenting organizations are seeking innovative ways to engage audiences and scrambling to increase audience attendance. It seems that criticism, reduced to responsive opinion, is considered the primary medium for doing so.

Audience engagement is a buzzword, considered the life raft of a performance community hit hard by the continuing repercussions of global economic instability. But still, it is a real value. We make performances most often to be viewed by others. We make art to engage ourselves, viewers, and other artists in conversation about our respective ideas. So where does criticism fit and why is it that the idea of "citizen critics", i.e. viewers with opinions, articulating their response publicly, is so distasteful to some?

Michael Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC states, "Every artist, producer or arts organization used to wait for a handful of reviews to determine the critical response to a particular project." And he laments that this is no longer the case due to the death of print media, the ousting of arts writers from local publications, and increased online activity. He states, "The growing influence of blogs, chat rooms and message boards devoted to the arts has given the local professional critic a slew of competitors...Many arts institutions even allow their audience members to write their own critiques on the organizational website." Without the vetting of editorial professionals at print publications, "the art that appeals to the lowest common denominator will always be deemed the best." Read more of his commentary and the slew of online comments [here](#).

A lot of people have taken issue with his position. For the most fair-minded responses to Kaiser's complaint check out [Thomas Garvey's view](#) of why this is a moment to re-make the standards of criticism all together and [Andy Horwitz' article](#) about the importance and vitality of audience responses. Horwitz states, "The magic of live performance – even the most traditional forms – is that the audience is never really a passive watcher – they are engaged and their response informs the performance. The internet as a forum for authentic feedback and reaction is vital to the growth, development and continued relevancy of the discipline."

I find this an interesting conversation as it relates directly to the thINKingDANCE project. As a group we are continually examining our expectations of what a dance writer is versus what it is we think is missing from and want to see in the performance community. Performance writing is an art form in and of itself. We need to ask, "How do I want to engage with the work, and how does my writing serve that? Who is my ideal audience?" rather than getting lost in the conversation of experts versus non-experts, print media versus online. I hope that with the advent of citizen critics, and the diverse and in-depth coverage that is possible on the Internet, the conversation about the role of criticism will shift to how to focus on ideas; to engage in an open dialogue around the ideas of a performance only invites more people to learn about the work, see the work, and question it further.

The function of criticism, in my opinion, is to engage in critical dialogue around the ideas and manifestations of a given artwork or art movement, in relationship to historical and contemporary contexts. Performance criticism needs to be extracted from the realm of review-as-marketing-tool and focused on dialogue around creative ideas. Isn't encountering the ideas of a citizen critic useful in that regard?

And what about when the citizen critics are the artists themselves? Check out [Emergency INDEX](#), a new publication from Ugly Duckling Presse in Brooklyn, NY that points to the problem this poses:

“Since a defining feature of performance is live-ness, documenting performance is a doomed endeavor. This has made it difficult for the emergent discipline of performance to look at itself, to take stock of its achievements and acknowledge its failures, quite simply, to assess the state of the field.”

This publication posits that the solution is in a model provided by the early issues of the performance art journal High Performance (1978-1997), “in which artists were openly invited to send in reports of their performance artworks. Consequently, High Performance became an amazing survey of real practice, a definition of performance art created internally by its varied creators, not post-rationalized or interpreted by critics and institutions.”

Emergency INDEX will “practice a policy of radical inclusion,” which sounds an awful lot like the vision of [iCritic Detroit](#), a mobile video booth that posts audience response videos to the Internet, with which Michael Kaiser took issue. It’s really a question of who’s contributing to the conversation around the work and whether their voice is considered vital in that regard. Artists who contribute documents about the development of a performance are different than audience members creating videos of their feedback--or are they? Since live art typically requires viewers, the development and research of a given performance is ongoing and continues as audience members leave the performance space and meditate on what they experienced. Their feedback exists not just as a “review” but also as responsive documentation and potentially a catalyst for further inquiry.

Claudia La Rocco, on her new The Performance Club [website](#), says in response to the question, “Does performance need publishing?": “not at all – one of the things I love about performance is how often it defies language. But but but – do I think the two art forms have a lot of fabulous things to say to, for, with and about each other? Yes yes yes.” Regarding Supernatural Wife by Big Dance Theater and her hope that the creators will submit it to Emergency INDEX, La Rocco says, “And it doesn’t need words (mine or anybody else’s) to complete it or give it legitimacy or freeze it in time (is there any word more chilling than timelessness?)...but ... I bet its creators, Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar,, would have some pretty interesting things to share. You know, with the class.” Although The Performance Club is an actual club, La Rocco here is referring to “us,” the general interested reader, as “the class,” highlighting the collective learning environment created by the distribution of critical writing about performance.

La Rocco refers to performance writing and criticism as its own form that can exist in dialogue with performance – surely the articulation of the audience experience is an important part of that dialogue. The potential here is to empower both artists and viewers in the discussion of their respective ideas. Performance writing then moves beyond a presumably vetted professional telling us what to see and what not to see and instead begins to push the work and the form further.

Emergency INDEX and iCritic Detroit could be seen as mediums where criticism manifests as documentation, not “review.” I think the two should not be so far apart. What do you think?

Please post freely your comments below, add your voice to the [Public Square](#) discussion of how reviews work best, and come to the [Public Conversation](#) with Wendy Perron to continue this conversation on Sunday, December 11 2-4pm at the Live Arts Brewery, 919 N 5th St.

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