Intersections Between Feminism and Post-modernism: Possibilities For Feminist Scenic Design

Raynette Halvorsen Smith

Introduction

Is there latitude in the profession of scenic design for feminist artistic expression? Is it possible to locate a practice in scene design which can shift the feminist critique from the margins to the center of this craft? Or is this profession of scenic design, the oldest recognized design area, too steeped in patriarchal theatre culture to admit feminist expression and retain its identity? It is my position that Post-modernism creates a context that would allow feminist expression in scenic design, expression which, until recent developments in feminist theory, has not been possible. This exploration of feminism and Post-modernism cannot outline the details of a new feminist scenic practice, but only point to ideas, directions, and tendencies which allow for such a possibility.

First I should clarify what is meant by "feminist expression." There is danger of eliding opposing feminist ideologies in the attempt to characterize this expression. However, in an essay titled "Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism," Angela Partington outlines two important premises broad enough to encompass differences in feminist ideology. She expands feminist expression into the term "feminist art practice" with two major criteria. These are defined as:

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> [1] . . . an intervention in the reproduction of *gender relations* (power and subordination) through the use and manipulation of the *means and processes* of artistic production.[1]

> [2] . . . [an attempt to] break with the dominant notions of art as personal expression, instead connecting it in with the social and the political and placing the artist as a producer in a new situation of responsibility for her images.[2]

These two premises offer for critique both the process of scene design, as well as the content of the work itself.

What "feminist art practice" is *not* is another "ism" to be conveniently incorporated into the plurality of "isms" now labeled Post-modernism. Feminism is based in a radical mass movement for social change. This makes it a revolution, not a style. The purpose in exploring the intersection between Post-modernism and feminism is not to locate a feminist style, but to discover a possible feminist strategy for scenic design.

Performance Art vs. Scenic Design

During the first wave of feminist artistic expression in the 1960's and 1970's, the strategy was largely to reject anything deemed traditional (and hence patriarchal). Included in the traditional were the physical trappings of conventional theatre spaces and theatrical design.[3] The visual impulse went elsewhere to new forms; most notably to performance art. However, in the 1980's there has been a gradual reversal in the practice of feminist performance art back towards more "mainstream" venues, such as video and theatre.

Performance artists Rachel Rosenthal and Laurie Anderson have been notable examples of this change; Rosenthal employing more theatrical devices, scenery, props, lighting, etc., Anderson a more "mass media" approach, i.e. video and CD recordings. Jeanie Forte, in her article "Women's Performance Art; Feminism and Postmodernism," describes this move:

> Instead of deconstructing theatrical convention, performers now seem to court it, encouraging judgement of the work on more technical grounds. . . .

> Rosenthal's performance style, always highly theatrical in effects and presentation, was once criticized for it's kinship with theatre; now others seek to emulate the theatrical coherence of her work, . . .[4]

Forte points to some reasons for this change in feminist strategy:

> In general, the mid-1980's has brought a regrouping, perhaps in response to a reactionary political climate, perhaps in the perceived failure of the 1970's strategies to achieve more measurable, visible effects.[5]

This trend has caused some artists, such as performer/dancer Wendy Woodson to denounce performance art, particularly as a feminist strategy ". . . because performance has become slick, commercial, more 'theatrical' in a negative assimilative way."[6]

There are, however, a number of ways to read this change in direction. The most cynical interpretation would place feminist art along side the numerous avant-garde movements in this century. As Richard Schechner describes the typical demise of these various movements: "Each wave [movement] is soaked up by the society it apparently hates and opposes--co-opted and made fashionable, turned into style."[7] Another reading, however, would be that Rosenthal and Anderson have not "sold out," but rather are reacting against perceived marginalism. They are, perhaps, shifting from a position outside the venues of theatre and "mass culture"[8] towards a critique from the center.

Among the possibilities for this change in position is a shifting ideology in feminist criticism. Deconstructionism and Post-modernism have attacked binary logic. Logic which assumed that if phallocentric forms could be identified, then feminists had merely to shed them and look for, or invent, female equivalents. For example, earlier feminist art attempted to counter the damage of sexism with what have been labeled "celebratory" strategies. These strategies included heroinization, vaginal iconography, body-art, and the incorporation of domestic skills into art media.[9] Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* stands now as the archetype of this strategy and has come under the most virulent attack from feminist critics.[10] What was thought to be withdrawal from these masculine forms and structures, feminist critics now dismiss as essentialist, as self imposed exile, as a critique from the margins while remaining trapped in these same forms.

At the center of this argument against essentialism is a changing definition of sexuality vs. gender. As Griselda Pollock points out in her essay "Feminism and Modernism," in the early parts of the feminist movement sexuality is treated as a discrete entity. Women regarded their sexuality as "a touchstone for truth." Hence a lot of body-based art was produced. However, as Pollack points out:

> Recent work on the history and theory of sexuality has generated significant reformulations. Instead of treating sexuality as something we have or even are--the touchstone of our being, of our gender, corrupted, repressed or misrepresented by patriarchal society,

> sexuality is defined as a product of society, of its practices and discourses through which we are positioned. . . .
>
> Sexuality is not an attribute of people, to be pictured or re-imagined. It is a set of effects and positions which artistic practices confront, are implicated in, or may dislocate in the way in which they produce positions for viewers and authors for the artistic text.[11]

This deconstructivist evolution in feminist theory forces the return to the long-running debate concerning strategies for feminist art. The question is re-posed:

> Should [feminist] visual work attempt to "recolonize" or reclaim the imagery of patriarchal culture and invest it with feminist values? Or . . . formulate a "new language" with which to articulate feminist meanings.[12]

The second strategy, to formulate a "new language," has largely been abandoned in this shift away from essentialism and because of discouragement architect Pauline Fowler has articulated thus: "The project of inventing new forms to embody feminist and/or the female sensibility is one which could very well last as long as time itself."[13] She describes a greater immediate danger in this project:

> It can be seen, therefore, as a convenient diversion which diffuses opposition to the dominant group by channeling it into unproductive pursuits which at the same time are infinitely amusing to those in power: participants in this futile search thus become accomplices to their own bondage.[14]

This leaves the second strategy; to "recolonize." But can feminists function from within a more traditional structure of theatre, maintain responsibility for their images, and avoid co-option? It is at this juncture, where women risk being marginalized outside of the traditional theatre culture or neutered within it, that feminist aims may be served by an intersection with Post-modernism.

The Advantages and Pitfalls of Post-modernism

The definitions of Post-modernism vary almost as much as those doing the defining (a manifestation of its much touted pluralism). It has been described, in one of a number of books dedicated to its definition, *The Post-modern Scene*, as Artaud's "body without organs," Rosalind Krauss' "negative space," Lyotard's "pure implosion," or Barthes' "looking away."[15] Recurring themes in the various definitions are "double coding" and "pluralism." Critic

Craig Owens states that "... postmodernism is usually treated, by its protagonists and antagonists alike, as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions."[16] Or, as in the title of the publication containing Owens' essay, it can be labeled "*The Anti-Aesthetic*."

The fact that Post-modernism not only denies cultural authority, but actually sets about to actively undermine it, gives it the deconstructive thrust that can serve the aims of feminism. However, the very pluralism that undermines that authority is not without its dangers to the feminist project:

> Pluralism, ... reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction of difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability.[17]

In a Post-modern context, feminism can on the one hand be trivialized, considered one of many marginal groups, and on the other treated as monolithic, collapsing the diversity of feminisms, (essentialism, culturalism, materialism, etc.), into one entity.

Post-modern pluralism threatens to neutralize the political impact of a staunch feminist refusal to be assimilated into the mainstream. As part of a group of Others, the specific feminist critique of patriarchy risks being neutralized.[18]

The path between Post-modernism and feminism is treacherous one. On one side of the path, artistic work based on essentialism threatens to keep feminists on the margins as Jeanie Forte points out:

> The threat and power of assimilation is constant, ... Yet, if performance artists are doomed to relative obscurity, playing only to audiences of "the converted," how will societal consciousness be raised (or abrased) on a larger scale?[19]

On the other side of this path is the risk of being homogenized into a mass of Others.

The challenge of Post-modernism is to conceive of difference without opposition; to recognize "absolute truth" is dead, replaced instead by "social agendas." Feminist deconstructionism can lift the veil of "truth" from artistic expression to reveal embedded social agendas of patriarchy. When the patriarchy can also be reduced to Other, freed from its claim on "the truth," then Post-modernism can serve the aims of feminism.

Re-visioning Feminist Scenic Design

It is important to recruit members into the theatre for this project of deconstruction from within the ranks of feminist performance art. This entry

into theatre will not come without its challenges, however. In examining the traditional artistic practices of the scenic designer, the apparatus of patriarchal culture is clearly in view. The mode of production is a hierarchical structure of producers and directors at the top of the chart to lowly assistant carpenters at the bottom. The control of the artistic content of design must filter through playwrights and producers and directors, as well as the designer. This is an assembly line model for production; the script goes in one end, passes through the director, the designers, the technicians, the actors, and comes out the finished product in a performance to be replicated identically at each curtain time. In this arrangement the designer can be held accountable for the technical quality of her images, but responsibility for the content is diffused.

Within this traditional structure of theatre, however, there is power: the power of larger budgets, access to skilled scenic artists and craftspersons. Artistically, there are many more material possibilities. On one hand is the danger of being co-opted, on the other is the reality that having women in positions of power can be invaluable, both as activists and as role models.[20]

The possibility for feminist scenic design practice is important because modern western culture so clearly privileges the visual. Recognition of this power of the visual to frame culture has lead to the feminist emphasis on film criticism. However, feminist criticism has largely focused on the semiotics and reception of the female body as it represents gender in art and in performance. Much less work has focused on the *visual* context of gender representation in performance.

Methods for analyzing the visual context of gender in scene design might be found in the theory of proxemics. The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, founder of this science defines proxemics as "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture."[21]

A definition of the social impact of form and space is more simply stated by architect Pauline Fowler:

> It now seems clear that there exists within society and the architectural discipline the implicit understanding that the forms of architecture embody the collective values of the society which these forms represent; . . .[22]

Theatre presents a complex set of social codes because of the layering of architecture (the theatre building itself), scenic elements, and the dynamic interpersonal space of the performer. The scenic designer is a powerful mediator between the architecture and performance space. Though constrained by the architecture and performers, the designer also contexualizes them both and thus creates the images in theatre which embody "the collective values of society."

If we can accept that there may be good reasons for a feminist scene design practice, the question remains: how could it be introduced into the

theatre? A logical place to look for the beginnings of a new feminist stagecraft would be feminist playwrights. However, their emphasis has remained focused on the written text and they have typically called for either very minimalistic or realistic visual support (although it is not clear whether this is an aesthetic choice based on ideology or financial considerations). The more interesting visual requirements crossed over into performance art methods of using actual locations or total environments.[23] However, feminist deconstruction of scenic elements would depend on the tradition of scene design. For it is the tradition, steeped in convention, that renders its symbols and methods invisible, and hence dangerous to the goals of sexual equality.

Some decontructionist strategies have been already been employed in traditional theatre formats. A notable example is pointed to by Arnold Aronson in his review of the Wooster Group's L.S.D.

> In terms of the text itself, what the Group does falls into the general category of deconstruction. The group takes a existing piece of dramatic literature, in this case *The Crucible*, and through a process of segmenting the text, repetitions and stripping away theatrical and dramatic contexts, finds resonances, meanings, textures and references in the text that were either not readily apparent or were not originally intended.[24]

However Aronson continues:

> . . . in creating a total *mise en scene*, the process seems closer to a manipulation of theatrical signifiers and icons than to any formal deconstructive process.[25]

The ruptures occur where there are already seams in theatre; between the actors and the script, between the actors and the scenery, between live and electronic representation, etc.

Of more interest to the project of feminist scenic design, would be to locate a rupturing from deeper within the form of visual theatre, to interrogate the forms which comprise the scenery. The object of this scenic interrogation, or deconstruction, would be to reveal the subtle ideological manipulations contained within the tradition of scenery itself which remain remarkably invisible. This strategy could reveal how scenery visually contextualizes the entire production, resulting in exposure of the social agendas embedded in that context.

This deconstructive interrogation of scenery could begin with simple questions such as: What is mediating the choice of scale between the actors and the scenic environment? How has stage space been allocated to the various actors/performers? How is the scenery mediating the performers' physical relationship to the audience? Which characters are rendered more

important or less important by their relationship to the scenic elements? And finally to the more directly feminist concerns: how are the scenic elements operating to privilege some ideologies while down playing others, and what ideologies are embedded in the very forms on stage?

Constructionism and Deconstructionism

Feminist deconstructivist intervention could occur on many different levels of the representation. One level is visual metaphor. An interesting example of scenery functioning deconstructively through use of visual metaphor is, paradoxically, the Russian Constructivist movement. Although Constructivism was the implementation of the "machine aesthetic," with efficiency and functionalism at it's heart, Constructivism was also an attack on formal composition. In explaining this, architect Nikolai Ladovsky stated, "The chief sign of construction [is] that there be no superfluous materials or elements in it," as opposed to, "The chief distinction of composition [which] is hierarchy, [and] coordination."[26]

Besides sharing the feminist distain for structures of hierarchy, the Russian Constructivists saw the importance of art as ethical, as a social utilitarian tool for improving the world. As the Russian revolution had sought to destroy the monarchy with its imperial hierarchy, so would the Constructivists attack the aesthetic imperative of composition with its embedded bourgeois hierarchy. It was to be a classless art based on function.

The revolutionary mission of Constructivism introduced elements to stage design which parallel Post-modern and feminist aims and methods: the collage/montage and the kinetic structure. The scenery for Meyerhold's production *Earth in Turmoil* by Constructivist artist Popova, demonstrates this move to collage in both her rendering of the design to the actual execution on stage.

> [Popova's set] was conceived almost as an industrial object; it resembled a giant gantry crane. . . . Political slogans relating to the structure of a new society (electrification, industry, the mechanization of agriculture) as well as references to the Revolution were continuously flashed onto a screen suspended from the crane. Newsreels and other films were also projected. The actors were illuminated with military search lights, and the props were taken from everyday life: a car, a tractor, motorcycles and a machine gun."[27]

Collage/montage is the ideal medium for Post-modernism. It conveys the "shock of the old" that is deconstructive in effect. Pieces of reality are torn apart and reassembled to radically alter the meaning of the original components. The multiple images echo the pluralism and double coding of the

Post-modern. According to Popova, the scenery/not scenery dualism she introduced was to create an "agitational effect," to motivate the audience towards social change. The artist's primary function was to select and combine objects from the "real world" with other scenic elements in such a way as to serve the social goals of a new art.[28]

The other interesting correlation of Constructivism to the Post-modern is the introduction of the kinetic structure to the scenic environment. Theatre art has always had a kinetic component: the movement of actors, and in more recent history through the control of lighting and *a vista* scene changes. But the Constructivists were the first to invest their structures with ideology, and then set those structures in motion which, in effect, set the ideologies in motion. This foreshadows the Post-modern ideas modeled on Quantum Theory. "Under the microscope, Quantum Theory finds the world indeterminate, relative, paradoxical; 'dashing' into the future."[29]

With the kinetic quality of the Russian Constructivist scenery, actors are not only moving around in relationship to the scenery, the scenery is moving in relationship to the actor: a visual representation of relativity.

Of particular relevance to feminist scene design is the direct way the Russians were investigating visual form through the machine, as encoding ideology. This ideology could then be manipulated, by changing the form, into expressing a new ideology. However, where the Constructionist manipulates the structure of the machine to change the ideology, the deconstructionist disassembles the machine to reveal it's inner workings.

Deconstructivist Architecture and Feminist Scenic Design

Recent examples of Deconstructivist strategies operating on the level of form can be seen in experiments involving architecture. In the preface to a catalogue of an exhibition of Deconstructivist Architecture, Associate Curator Mark Wigley describes the unsettling effects of this architectural practice:

> A deconstructive architect is . . . not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates inherent dilemmas within buildings. The deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is interrogated.[30]

The feminist interest in such work converges with Post-modernism in that the deconstruction does not destroy and replace the form, but rather distorts and displaces it. The point is to display the plural realities, where one cannot discern which came first: the form or the distortion. This functions to undermine the patriarchal authority and clear sense of hierarchy.

This symbiotic joining anarchy and pure form:

> . . . produces a feeling of unease, of disquiet, because it challenges the sense of stable, coherent identity that we associate with pure form. It is as if perfection had always harbored imperfection, that it has always had certain undiagnosed congenital flaws which are only now becoming visible. . . .
>
> What makes them [the architectural forms] disturbing is the way they find the unfamiliar already hidden with the familiar context. By their [deconstructive] intervention elements of the context become defamiliarized.[31]

When feminist artists devise methods to "find the unfamiliar already hidden with the familiar context" of theatrical scene design, and to intervene in "elements of the context," the tradition of theatre will be "defamiliarized." When the audience can view the stage in this disoriented state, the invisible structures of patriarchal representation are brought into focus for re-evaluation. This would be the critique from the center. This would be postmodern feminist scenic design.

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Notes

1. Angela Partington, "Feminist Art and Avant-Gardism," in *Visibly Female; Feminism and Art: An Anthology*, ed. Hilary Robinson (New York: Universe Books, 1988).

2. J. Barry and S. Filtterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies," *Screen* 21:2 (1980) 35-48. Cited in Partington, "Feminist Art" 228, 230.

3. However, it is also true that this rejection was mutual. Women had never made inroads into the scene design profession. This is discussed at length in my article, "Where Are the American Women Scene Designers?", *Theatre Design and Technology* 24:1 (Spring, 1988) 5.

4. Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Theatre Journal* 40:2 (May, 1988) 233.

5. 233.

6. 232-3.

7. Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication, 1982) 15.

8. Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow; Performance Art and Mass Culture," *The Drama Review* 33:2 (Summer, 1983, T122).

9. Partington, "Feminist Art" 232.

10. Karen Woodly, "The Inner Sanctum: *The Dinner Party*," in *Visibly Female* 97.

11. Griselda Pollack, "Feminism and Modernism," in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollack, eds., *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85* (London: Pandora Press, 1987) 109.

12. Partington, "Feminist Art" 228.

13. Pauline Fowler, "Women Building Culture; Architecture for Feminists," in Rhea Tregebov, ed., *Work in Progress: Building Feminist Culture* (Toronto, Canada: The Women's Press, 1987) 136.

14. 136-7.

15. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Post Modern Scene; Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) 7.

16. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983) 57.

17. 58.

18. Owens, "The Discourse of Others" 62.

19. Forte, "Women's Performance Art" 234.

20. Partington, "Feminist Art" 229.

21. Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 1. Cited in Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980) 62.

22. Fowler, "Women Building Culture" 139.

23. Some notable examples were Ellen Sebastian's *Your Place Is No Longer With Us*, and Maria Irene Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends*. Sebastian's play becomes the ultimate manifestation of this shedding the theatrical machinery in that it takes place "on location" as it were, in an actual house. *Fefu and Her Friends* takes place in an environment created on stage and in the adjoining rooms off stage.

24. Arnold Aronson, "The Wooster Group's L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...) in Brooks McNamara and Jill Dolan, eds., *The Drama Review: Thirty Years of Commentary on the Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986) 358.

25. 358.

26. Margit Rowell and Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *The Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1981) 226.

27. 298.

28. 298.

29. David George, "On Ambiguity: Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory," *Theatre Research International* 14:1, 71.

30. Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988) 11.

31. 17.

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