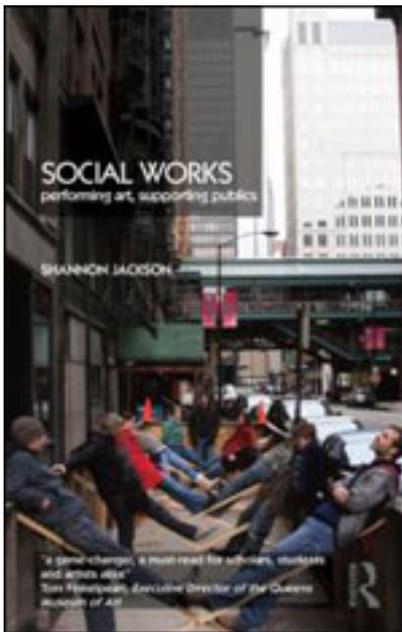


## ***Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* by Shannon Jackson**

Jennifer Cayer | Amherst College

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Shannon Jackson's *Social Works* embraces a range of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century visual and theatrical works of Europe and the Americas variously categorized as performance ethnography, site-specific art, documentary theater, public art, and post-dramatic theatre. Like Amelia Jones, Jane Blocker, and Rebecca Schneider, Jackson—Professor of Rhetoric and Theater, Dance and Performance Studies at University of California, Berkeley—takes on a capacious set of projects in theaters, on streets, and in galleries to offer “critical traction” to a field of expanded art practices vexed by medium-specific critical approaches (14). She traverses genealogies of visual and theatre studies in order to dislodge the perceptual and methodological patterns that tend to overlook the interdependencies between art and social systems. Rather than looking at how art does something to or for a public, Jackson devotes attention to works that provoke a sense of the blurred lines between the artist and the social. To do this, she deftly balances aesthetic theory, including: Michael Fried, Marcel Duchamp, Theodor Adorno, and Bertolt Brecht, among others, with social and political theory, including: Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Michel Foucault. The vocabulary that emerges around what Jackson names an “infrastructural aesthetic” in *Social Works* expands the critical frames for political art of all varieties and enlivens the stakes of cross-disciplinary experimentation.

While the majority of the case studies in *Social Works* focus on visual artists who turn to performance, Jackson has two aims: first, she considers what these cross-art turns allow for the artist and, second, what the re-purposing of performance can reveal for theater and performance scholars. For Jackson, an artist's departure in medium often goes hand-in-hand with a desire to explore the contingency of the representational field itself. Performance is an apt form to examine the connections and tensions of art and the social because of its communal aspects. Even if it appears so, performance is never entirely solo, solitary, or autonomous from the spaces in which it takes place. Building upon Peggy Phelan's enduring definition of the ephemerality of performance, Jackson exposes what she calls "the material relations that support the de-materialized act" in critical analyses that balance biographical and historical context, the vagaries of institutional support and art markets, juxtapositions of political and aesthetic theory, formal analyses, and phenomenological thick descriptions.

Instead of valorizing projects that fit models of social efficacy or critical taste, often linked to an anti-institutional, artist-as-transgressor stance, in her own study, Jackson engages the paradoxes that arise between an artwork and particular social systems, including public infrastructure, the environment, global labor, technology networks, and kinship. The analysis in *Social Works* begins by pairing Shannon Flattery's Touchable Stories and Santiago Sierra's human installations as a way to unsettle the frames around art, activism, and community shaped by relational aesthetics, as articulated by curator Nicolas Bourriaud and visual art critic Claire Bishop. These debates stymied critical discussions across art and politics as well as the visual and the theatrical by reifying them as distinct realms and situating artists as either properly critical and antagonistic or complicit. Jackson takes particular aim at Bishop's separation between the corrosive influence of the state versus the supposed neutrality of the gallery space and insists upon a third way that acknowledges the heterogeneous mixed economies of art (27). The next chapter focuses on Mierle Laderman Ukeles's "collaborations" with the New York Sanitation Department and the ways in which her artistic identity combined with that of the policy advocate, giving rise to layered notions of labor both within and outside of the gallery space.

The fourth chapter of Jackson's book, "Staged Management," centers on the role of institutional critique (IC) in works by Allan Sekula, Andrea Fraser, and William Pope.L. IC, or context art, refers to a largely art world movement of works that reveal the economic, political or social implications embedded within presentation spaces and systems of support. Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's site-specific museum critique in *The Couple in the Cage* is a familiar example for performance studies students and scholars. The chapter title refers to both theatrical labor and the concurrent systemic and logistical labors that often go unnoticed but comprise a central part of art's inherent sociality. The next two chapters continue a discussion of the theatricality of IC with special attention to the connections between cross-media projects and broader social and political systems, including Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's public works on national welfare. In her comparisons of The Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll's explorations of global

call centers, Jackson challenges the so-called “new” media of theatrical interventions by reversing the critical gesture in order to not only see the digital influence upon the theater, but the theatrical interventions into digital space. She is especially interested in works that mimic or replicate something of the institutional or systemic structures to which they aim to respond, or even challenge. The final chapter contrasts a comprehensive analysis of Paul Chan’s *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* with the Federal Theatre Project’s 1937 production of *Power*, providing a longer temporal frame in order to historically situate the changing relations of subjects and systems.

Throughout the various studies that comprise *Social Works*, Jackson demonstrates the critical mobility across psychoanalysis, feminist, queer, and critical race theory needed to produce interpretations that trouble the very grounds of what constitutes art, life, and the public. An analysis of Joe Goode’s dance-theater piece *Deeply There* brings together the figure of the child in art and queer belonging as a final example of a work that challenges normative notions of support and reveals the, “bodily, logistical, and psychic labor of sustaining relationality” (246). This work—in its pleasures and its pains, to borrow Jackson’s refrain—is essential to sustaining and imagining future forms of public life. The art event, situated in a broad nexus of forces, makes visible the interdependent lines of tension in and with the social. In *Social Works* Jackson compels scholars to notice the social mechanisms through which such lines of support and paradoxical dependencies are effaced. What we find, she promises, is recognition of the web of material and affective relations required for any of us to imagine that we might be standing on our own.

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