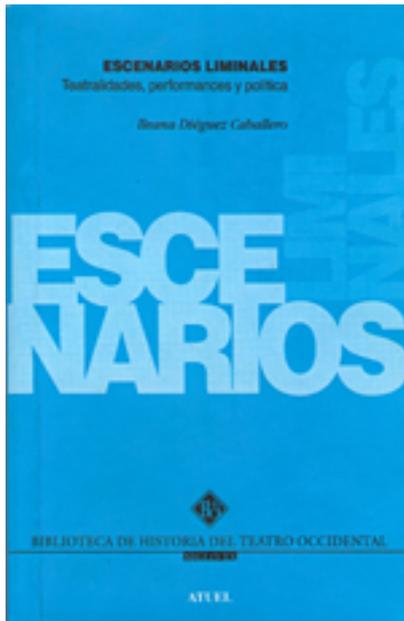


Ileana Diéguez Caballero's *Escenarios liminales*

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Escenarios liminales. Teatralidades, performances y política. Ileana Diéguez Caballero. Buenos Aires: ATUEL, 2007. 223 pages.



Ileana Diéguez's *Escenarios liminales* (*Liminal Stages/Scenarios*) is one of the most important publications to appear in Latin America addressing the region's performance practices of recent years. The author—of Cuban origin and currently working in Mexico—discusses theatre and performance art in Peru, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, choosing key examples of performances that not only break with stage conventions, but that point to new ways of engaging politics. As opposed to the Popular Theatre movement prevalent in Latin America during the 60s and 70s, or to established playwrights and directors who became known at the time, the practitioners mentioned by Diéguez belong to a generation influenced by postmodern aesthetics in a region no longer governed by right-wing dictatorships. Groups such as Yuyachkani (from Peru), El Periférico de los Objetos (Argentina) and Mapa Teatro (Colombia) face the paradox of living in countries that have espoused democracy, yet suffer under the tenets of neoliberal economic policies that have radicalized the rich-poor divide. Many performances discussed in the book address the unhealed wounds of a violent, U.S.-backed "dirty war" waged against dissident activists. The new social, cultural, and political scenarios call for a new aesthetics from which to articulate a critical voice. Diéguez locates this aesthetics in the intersections between art and politics, theatre and visual arts, text and body, presence and representation, leading to performances she describes as liminal (using Turner's understanding of the term) in that they not only subvert the boundaries of the above-mentioned aspects, but also operate in the "breach produced by the crisis" of contemporary Latin American societies (31). The crisis referred to by the author is also one of representation, that is, of the ways artists

subvert the distinctions between the real and the simulacral in their work. But Diéguez is not only interested in the work of artists; she looks also at the work of activists who engage in performance strategies to create dissident acts in the public sphere. Such is the case of Peru's Colectivo Sociedad Civil, which organized a collective washing of the national flag in the year 2000, speaking to the corrupt State apparatus and the need to perform a ritual cleansing of the national body. Actions such as the ones performed by the Colectivo owe much to the Situationist movement, and aim to resist the spectacularization of State politics by means of a radical politization of art (92-93). Another example cited by Diéguez is Mexico's Peaceful Resistance movement which emerged in the wake of the electoral fraud that took place during the 2006 presidential elections, leading to the swearing-in of the right-wing candidate. It is in this context that actress and director Jesusa Rodríguez developed her Creative Resistance project, involving a wide spectrum of activists concerned with the intervention of politically-charged public spaces to make visible the citizens' rejection of the fraud.

Diéguez's book departs from earlier studies of Latin American theatre which limit themselves to historical and descriptive accounts, or at best resort to theatre semiotics to analyze a given performance. The author fully engages with poststructural theory, especially the work of Derrida, Bakhtin, Deleuze, Kristeva and Bhabha. She is as conversant with performance and postcolonial studies, as she is with Latin American theatre theorists such as Gabriel Weisz and Jorge Dubatti. From the latter she stresses the concept of *convivio* (to coexist or, literally, to co-live), that is, the dialogical process that occurs when theatre practitioners engage with the audience. For Diéguez, *convivio* allows for a range of practices that may lead to a shared aesthetic experience, but also, and for her more importantly, to a collective politics. Other authors she uses to examine the emergence of a more visual, fragmented and rizomatic performance aesthetics are Hans-Thies Lehmann (*Postdramatic Theatre*) and José A. Sánchez (*Dramaturgias de la imagen*), while the writings of Argentine director Eduardo Pavlovsky help articulate an argument about the new "body ethics" posed by performers for whom the physical interaction with others is an act of risk that implies a serious social commitment (88).

Escenarios liminales recalls a book that goes un-cited in Diéguez's bibliography: *Liminal Acts*, by Susan Broadhurst (1999). While Broadhurst precedes Diéguez in assessing postmodern performance from the perspective of Turner's liminality and poststructural theory, she cites no Latin American example, nor is she interested in the performances' political implications. Diéguez's richly textured arguments are written with an understanding of the social relevance of the groups she discusses, as well as the aesthetic and philosophical challenges they pose. Oddly, given the subject matter of visually based performances, neither book features a single picture of the cases discussed, and one hopes that at least in Diéguez's case, a second edition may provide such materials.

To cite postmodernism and poststructuralism in Diéguez's book does not mean that Latin

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American performance is a derivative of Euro-continental trends. We read, for example, of how the Peruvian group Yuyachkani (led by Miguel Rubio) navigates freely from popular, community-based street performances, to sophisticated conceptual pieces that combine theatre with installation art. Yuyachkani creates liminal performances because it operates in the interstices of ritual, myth, art and politics, frontally engaging a society wounded by a dirty war between the State and Maoist guerrillas. Diéguez describes the work of Teresa Ralli and Ana Correa as paradigmatic of the group's ability to address trauma and loss by means of performances designed to procure a collective healing. Thus, the sensibility displayed by this and other groups is not merely "postmodern," but rather a complex, hybrid sensibility, more akin to Latin American "anthropophagic" traditions of critical appropriation informed by political concerns.

Diéguez goes on in the next chapters to discuss the work of El Periférico de los Objetos (Argentina) and Mapa Teatro (Colombia), both of which engage with a multiplicity of media to create visually unsettling performances designed to jog audiences out of complacent, consumerist attitudes. Founded in 1989 by Daniel Veronese, Ana Alvarado and Emilio García Wehbi, El Periférico de los Objetos mixes live and puppet performance to address the vulnerability of individuals in a society unable to heal the trauma generated by the dirty war. In the wake of the 2001 economic crisis that led to national bankruptcy, the group designed an urban intervention called *Filoctetes, Lemnos en Buenos Aires* to challenge passers-by to stop and consider their existence as ephemeral, anonymous citizens in a devastated society. Diéguez also discusses the performances of *H.I.J.O.S.*, a collective of young activists who descend from people tortured, killed or disappeared during the dictatorship. Likewise political in its positions, Colombia's Mapa Teatro (under the artistic direction of Rolf Abderhalden) further explores the relationship of art and the social "real," by involving disenfranchised subjects in their productions. Their highly conceptual work is an often part-documentary, part-philosophical essay.

Ileana Diéguez's *Escenarios liminales* demonstrates that Latin American performing arts continue to be a privileged site from which to articulate a deconstruction of hegemonic discourses. Most of these performances trust the eloquence of visual imagery and their ability to interpell audiences in ways at once intellectual, visceral and political.

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