Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley

Jon Erickson

A controversy has been raging in America recently about whether the desecration or destruction of the national flag is protected by free speech as defined by the Constitution. Two cases in particular that caught the public's eye were a flag-burning protest by a young Communist at the Republican National Convention in Dallas and an art work shown in a minority-student show at the Art Institute of Chicago, called "What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?" The piece consisted of a photocollage of flag-draped coffins, a comment book on a stand, and an American flag laid on the floor, blocking access to the comment book. While Vietnam veterans and others were protesting the art work, the Supreme Court was deliberating on the constitutionality of the right to burn a flag as a form of free expression. It has since ruled that burning the flag does indeed come under the category of free speech. The protest over this decision even prompted President Bush to call for a constitutional amendment that exempts flag desecration from acts of free speech.

Both of these acts can be called acts of transgression against the sacred status of a symbol "owned" by the people who pay it respect and even die for it. It is appropriated by those who read its symbolism differently; for them, instead of being a symbol of freedom, it is a symbol of oppression, and its desecration or destruction gives the protestor a personal sense of power, even if only to enrage the flag's defenders. To the protester, this act of devaluation is a symbolic striking at the heart of a system, similar to using a voodoo doll. To the flag's defenders, however, such an act only increases the symbolic value the flag has had for them, and increases their desire to punish those for whom it is a sign of oppression. While part of the defense's case in the Supreme Court decision focused on what a flag really *is*, the artist who put the flag on the floor did not really question the ontological status of the flag, as Jasper Johns once did in a more neutral way (neutrality is necessary for

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such questioning). Instead, the art work signified an acceptance of the flag's sacred status and an appropriation of its conventional sign values for (mis)use. Indeed, the term "proper" in the title is the key term in the whole controversy.

"Propriety," "proper," and "appropriation" all have a common ground for meaning in the notion of *property.* This etymological connection becomes even clearer if we recognize that in English a change in the secondary accentuation of the last syllable of the word "appropriate" accompanies the change from adjectival usage, (a sense of something being "suitable" or "proper") to use as a verb (an act of stealing, taking something from one context to use differently in another). The new context to which the appropriated term or symbol is being applied often involves recognition of the misuse of the term in order to point out an ideological status never questioned in its original use. So the appropriated term is now "owned" in a different, usually ironic, way by those who never felt they owned it in the first place. The postmodern use of appropriation in visual art since Pop is now familiar, and includes the practices of graffiti artists, artists of the "Pictures" school, "Simulationists" and even artists appropriating icons of high modernism, like Sherrie Levine. What these different artists have in common is the use of appropriation of various imagery to transgress the notions of originality and quality that separate high art from mass and popular culture. Appropriation and transgression in this sense always work together. "Transgression," according to the Oxford Universal Dictionary, carries the notion of "passing beyond the bounds of legality or right," and also the notion of "trespass"—being where you don't belong. "Appropriation" is "the making of a thing private property" or "taking to one's own use." In order to make something that belongs to others your own, you must transgress, that is, trespass, across those boundaries separating what is yours from what is theirs. I make it mine, so the effectiveness that your meaning gives to it is devalued. This doubleness is at the core of both parody and travesty: the ridicule of "authority."

My concern here will be how appropriation and transgression have worked together in recent American theater and performance art. I will briefly describe works by the Wooster Group, Holly Hughes and Karen Finley, and then discuss the relevance these works have to the problematic uses of appropriation and transgression in our culture by marginalized subjects and critical consciousness.

The Wooster Group, which in the 1970s grew out of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, has always tested the limits of propriety in its performances. Under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, battles were fought over charges of racism, sexism, breach of confidence, copyright violation, as well as bad taste. The transgressive aspect of three different works is the source of such accusation.

Rumstick Road, the second part of the *Rhode Island Trilogy,* based on memoirs of Spalding Gray, was performed in 1977. It contained the unauthorized use of a telephone conversation with the psychiatrist of Gray's mother; she had committed suicide not long before. The psychiatrist was taped without his knowledge and the tape was played without his permission. *Route 1 & 9* was performed at the Performing Garage in New York in 1981 and 1982. It combined enactments of parts of Thornton Wilder's classic play *Our Town* (on video) with a patronizing academic and "humanist" com-

mentary on the action. It also included a wild party in which the all-white cast was made up in blackface and acted out white stereotypes of blacks as wild, lascivious, and naive; this material was taken from a comedy act by black vaudevillian Pigmeat Markham. The final scene consisted of a videotape of pornography created by members of the group. In 1984, in the play *LSD (. . . Just the High Points . . .)* memoirs of acid-guru Timothy Leary's babysitter from the early 1960s were narrated and acted out; one of the acts consisted of the recreation of a videotaped rehearsal in which the cast was tripping on LSD. Excerpts from Arthur Miller's Salem witch-trial play *The Crucible* were also enacted, in a way that literalized the play's covert reference to the House Unamerican Activities Committee "witch hunts." Miller, who had seen a performance of the play and worried that his work was being travestied, tried to prevent any further use of *The Crucible* in *LSD*. A play by Michael Kirby called *The Hearing* was then substituted, while occasionally lines from *The Crucible* were spoken so quickly as to be unintelligible. Whenever lines became recognizable, however, a loud buzzer was sounded and the actor was silenced.

Holly Hughes, who had performed her theatrical works at WOW Cafe, a lesbian performance space in New York's East Village, created in collaboration with performers Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw a play entitled *Dress Suits for Hire* in 1987. Its premiere, at PS 122, was the first of Hughes's works performed in a venue that was not exclusively lesbian; later it would be performed before an academic audience at the University of Michigan. The play involves two women who live together as lovers in a rental clothing store. In this claustrophobic atmosphere there is much putting clothes on and off, and a conscious experimenting with images and attitudes that are classified in lesbian terms as "butch" or "femme"—the most deliberate images being cowboy boots and hat versus garter belt and evening gown. The actions of both of the characters, Michigan and Deeluxe, contain elements of this passive-aggressive dichotomy. A third "character" in this relationship is Deeluxe's right hand, which takes on a life of its own as Little Peter, the patriarchal intrusion into this female scene. He "kills" her at the beginning of the play, and she "strangles" him in due course. *Dress Suits for Hire* is a site of struggle over the control of subjectivity located within sexual role playing. The butch/femme binary, as a versatile play element within lesbian performance (both theatrical and quotidian) tries to assert its independence from the male/female dichotomy of heterosexual sex roles founded in gender difference.

Karen Finley first became known in performance circles for smearing candied yams over her buttocks in a New York cabaret (which led to a rumor that promoted a more anal suggestion). She proceeded to make her mark with more verbal pieces that have the ability to outrage audiences with their blatant combination of perverse sex and graphic violence. Finley's subject matter includes incest, child abuse, patricide, suicide, castration, and cannibalism. Although its outrage and violence is predominantly aimed at upwardly mobile and greedy males who walk on the bodies of the poor in America, her sarcasm targets almost everyone. Her uncompromising performances have barred her from performing in many otherwise open performance spaces. Finley begins her performances with an initially friendly seduction of the audience, speaking openly about her body and its functions, and then proceeds to destroy that rapport

through her aggressive speech. In her most famous piece, *The Constant State of Desire*, she smashes eggs in a plastic bag and then uses a toy rabbit to wipe the yolk over her naked body. She pours glitter over herself and throws some into the audience. The work consists of various monologues interrupted by direct address to the audience. She enters her monologues as if they were trance states, closing her eyes and chanting and wailing the words as if possessed. Despite the aggression of her words, her stage presence is vulnerable, and interruptions from the audience can be enough to make her stop her show.

What, in these instances, are the forms of appropriation, and what are their uses as transgression? The Wooster Group is the only case of "stealing" in a legal sense: the unauthorized use of a doctor's confidential conversation and the unauthorized use of the work of one of America's most famous playwrights.[1] In the first case, the transgression may be seen as a protest against the inordinate power that doctors and psychiatrists have over their patients (Mrs. Gray had electroshock therapy); against the confidentiality of a doctor's records, often used more for the protection of the doctor than of the patient (especially when the patient is dead). In the second case transgression lies in the attack on the sanctity of a work like *The Crucible*, that once served as a protest against the abuse of authority but now has become a cipher for authority itself. Despite the fact that LeCompte repeatedly petitioned Miller for permission and insisted that her use of the play was not parodistic, he was worried that its use by the Wooster Group would inhibit a "straight" version of the play done in New York by a "first-rate" company. The final attempt to use the material, in which the text was reduced to gibberish, marked an interesting point in its appropriation. Every time a line was deemed recognizable by an "official," who sounded a buzzer and silenced the actor, the question of "ownership" became reduced to a thin demarcation of recognizability versus unrecognizibility.[2] LeCompte's other "appropriation" of a cultural icon, *Our Town*, drew attention to Wilder's humanistic presumption of the universality of reference of a small, polite New England town. The use of a commentator, who simplistically laid out the themes of the play accentuates this presumption. But LeCompte insisted that she liked both *Our Town* and *The Crucible*, finding serious value in both of them. So the treatment they received from the company was not to be seen merely as dismissive parody, but as an isolation of the

[1]A detailed account of the Wooster Group's performance work and conflicts over legality can be found in David Savran's book *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988). For a discussion of the Wooster Group's work as "political" theater within the context of postmodernist theory, see Philip Auslander, "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 39 (1987): 20–34.

[2]A similar problem arises in pop music, especially rap. Rap groups often use a digital sampler, which can record a few seconds of a sound, natural or recorded, and immediatley loop it so that it forms part of the rhythm of a song. Rap artists have had a tendency to "sample" other artists, old and new (James Brown is a favorite) for use in their own songs. It may be a form of homage, or it may be used as a form of mockery. The practice creates a challenge to copyright laws, where the recognizability of incremental sounds must form the basis for litigation if the "ripped off" artist wishes to sue.

particular values that presume to universality, and in the case of *The Crucible* as a critique of Miller's self-exemption from what he portrayed.

This question of self-exemption or inclusion in what one portrays is an important element in the Wooster Group's work. They have maintained that in whatever it is they may be criticizing, they are themselves also implicated. The outrage over the use of blackface in *Route 1 & 9* (which cost the group their funding from New York State for the year) raised the question of whether the production was racist or not. The depiction of blacks that surfaced in nineteenth-century minstrel shows stereotypically ridiculed the black man as lazy, stupid, and sensual in nature. Pigmeat Markham (who enjoyed brief television fame in the 1960s on the program "Laugh-In") was a black comedian who himself performed in blackface in the 1920s and 1930s, appropriating the white stereotype for the ironic ridicule of black audiences. What happens when white actors reappropriate this image and perform it without any distancing mechanism (such as allowing the actor to display outrage at this behavior)? The Wooster Group claims to leave it up to the audience to determine how the material is being used. In its consideration of self-implication, the Wooster Group claims simply to be noting their own, and our own, hidden racism, racism that is usually disguised by good intentions and liberal attitudes.

The appropriation strategies found in *Dress Suits for Hire* are not solely those of Holly Hughes, but are common to lesbian signifying systems. The issue of appropriation centers less on transgressing the norms of a dominant heterosexual ideology (although those are strongly featured) than on the development of a strong lesbian subjectivity free from those norms. This decentering arises because it is maintained that female subjectivity in general is denied by patriarchal culture, which posits women only as objects of male heterosexual desire. The appropriation of traditional gender-related sex roles found in straight discourse—masculine and feminine, male and female—is transformed into the terms "butch" and "femme." Some feminists have claimed that these terms are not strictly "imitation" of heterosexual sex roles, but are more free-floating signifiers used and discarded at will by the lesbian subject. The true lesbian subject is then defined as "not-man, not-woman," but as a free agency of signification.[3] The non-essential purity of this agency is implied in the statement of Sue-Ellen Case, following Baudrillard, that "butch-femme seduction is always located in semiosis."[4] That is, seduction is not located in the body itself, but in the body's conscious use of signification.

The difficulty in preserving the "appropriate" use of these terms and the discourse they engender within lesbian performance is demonstrated when the performance

[3]Kate Davy, "Reading Past the Heterosexual Imperative, *Dress Suits to Hire*," *The Drama Review* 33 (Spring 1989): 155.

[4]Sue-Ellen Case, "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," *Discourse* (Fall/Winter 1988–1989): 70. The complications involved in the question of lesbian sexual identity cannot be covered in this more general discussion of appropriation and transgression. For more on this debate, I refer the reader to the Case essay, as well as to Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 155–77; Jill Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance," *Theatre Journal* 39 (1987): 156–74; and the above essay by Kate Davy.

is taken to non-lesbian audiences. Concern has been expressed over the possibility of straight audiences "appropriating" the interpretation of sex roles in *Dress Suits,* lessening its subversive power, and missing the meaning intended for lesbians.[5] Hughes's response to this concern goes against the grain of a more academic protectionism, maintaining that there is no "correct" reading, of work or audience: "I don't know that there is a straight male audience. I think you can be noticed by the mainstream and not be co-opted."[6] The question here centers on the possibility of the lesbian's appropriation of the dominant culture's sex codes being "reappropriated" by the culture, undermining their initial subversiveness. But the question of whether the use made by lesbian culture is entirely different from that made by the dominant culture is something to ponder, as Hughes does: "I'm just refusing to make this lesbian feminist fairy tale that only affirms what women want to know about themselves and that we're better than everyone else. . . . I don't think that it's all that beautiful and that women's desire is so completely different from men's desire. There's desire to possess and voyeurism and objectification. Hopefully, the object becomes a subject in women's desire, but it's not all clean-cut and whole wheat berries."[7] In fact, "Little Peter," the patriarchal hand that "kills" Deeluxe at the beginning of the play—"In fact she is dead for the rest of the play," rendered "lifeless" by patriarchy—reappears in the window at the end of the play wearing a pinky ring, a butch signifier. Does this act perhaps question the distinction between the way a straight male subject objectifies and the way a butch subject does? Unfortunately the creation of "subjects" doesn't eliminate the concomitant creation of objects, since one implies the other, especially in the economy of desire.

Karen Finley is an example of a new strain in women writer-performers, including Johanna Went and Kathy Acker, who through excessive, obsessive, and obscene articulations that combine twisted sexual practices with the violence of power relations, appropriate what has been the essentially male voice in pornographic discourse. This appropriation is less of particular material than of a position from which to speak. These new writers attempt to set new conditions for the understanding of female sexuality, in itself and in male sexuality's relation to it. Finley refers to the latter as basically "womb envy." Finley's project seems in part to be done in the spirit of revenge, as she says in *The Constant State of Desire,* after fantasizing cutting off the balls of Wall Street investors and turning then into chocolate candies for their children: "I get my revenge. O, I get my sweet revenge."[8] This performance focuses on the absolute power of the father, including a scene in which he is sexually abusing

[5]Davy, "Heterosexual Imperative," 166–67. See also Rebecca Schneider, "Holly Hughes, Polymorphous Perversity and the Lesbian Scientist, An Interview," *The Drama Review* 33 (Spring 1989): 177.

[6]Schneider, "Holly Hughes, Polymorphous Perversity," 177.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Karen Finley, *The Constant State of Desire, The Drama Review* 32 (Spring 1988): 143. For other articles that deal with Finley's performance see Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire"; Cindy Carr, "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts, The Taboo Art of Karen Finley," *Village Voice,* 24 June 1986: 86; and Richard Schechner, "Karen Finley, A Constant State of Becoming, An Interview," *The Drama Review* 32 (Spring 1988): 155.

his little daughter in the refrigerator with carrots, cucumbers and zucchini, showing her what its like "to be a mama." Finley refers to the father's suicide in the piece, recalling the suicide of her own father. But the mother is implicated in the chain of violence as well, smoking and watching soap operas while her son penetrates her anally. Her absolute indifference and his fear of getting her angry indicates another sort of sadistic power wielded by the family. A despairing note is sounded when Finley exclaims (ironically or not?) "It's better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all."[9]

The obsession that Finley articulates is indeed a constant state of desire, a socially imposed value that infects all other relations—the desire for absolute control and mastery which in turn promotes abuse at every level, sees other human beings as means for satisfying one's insatiable appetites, eventually turns inward to devour the family itself and ends in suicide. It seems that she is appropriating the male voice to push it to its limits as a despotic force. But when she says "It's the father, it's the father, it's the father in all of us," is she seeing the "father" as the enemy, or as a inevitable aspect of behavior found in both sexes? There are points where she would seem to erase sexual difference in terms of behavior, as after the two incest scenes: "Is this what it's like to be a mama? Is this what its like to be a daddy? No, this is what it is like to be part of the whole human race."[10]

For both the act of performing and the act of writing, Finley puts herself in a kind of trance state; she believes herself to be a medium, that there are voices that speak through her.[11] In performance, her trance state places her in the masochistic position of having these images "inflicted" on her, while her own rant accosts and inflicts the audience with these images. So while the act appears to be masochistic, its manifestation is a sadistic one as well, imposing discomfort and guilt on the audience. She has said that after performing she has to vomit, and the day before she does not eat, as though immersing herself in a state akin to anorexia and bulimia. Her "appropriation" is then a double appropriation—that of the male voice and of the female position that the male voice constitutes. She begins by displaying her body in ways both matter-of-fact and seductive, and subverts this approach through monologues that for most audiences can only be a sexual turn-off (admittedly for some, female or male, they feed the desire for revenge or create identification with the oppressors she describes). In this sense the monologues bring the feelings of the audience out into the open. Revelations of incest and child abuse were the journalistic "transgressions" of the 1980s, making private property public knowledge. Transgression, then, is the making seen of what was hidden; it is the all-consuming drive of appearance in an information society. It is the betrayal of secrets. What becomes common knowledge becomes common property, allowing others, strangers, to do what they will with it. In this sense, transgression, as Finley participates in it, is a martyr.

[9]Ibid., 150.
[10] Ibid.
[11]Richard Schechner, "Karen Finley, A Constant State of Becoming," 155.

In all of these cases of appropriation we find one common thread—the question of how one perceives being seen by others, how one defines one's own "subjectivity," and how "subjectivity" relates to cultural determination. Holly Hughes plays with what can be seen on the one hand as the "property" of a lesbian signifying system, while for most straights it is seen as the "original" property of heterosexual role models. While Hughes herself seems to recognize the ambiguity latent in artistic meanings that will vary according to the audience, it would seem that her more utopian defenders want to control the "correct" reading of her use of symbols. The concern many academic feminists have had about their discourse being "appropriated" by male feminists is that an aspect of the desire for empowerment is to be able to own and control the operation of one's words. The question here is really whether they want men to be involved in the discourse or not. If they don't, they can't expect inroads in a power structure dominated by men. The point of discourse, and of representation in general, is that one *cannot* own and control how something said or shown is to be interpreted. "Appropriation" in an open field of discourse is "inappropriate," it doesn't make sense—one cannot own the meanings of words. Of course the operational word here is "open." Unfortunately a majority in any particular institution of power determines how "open" that is. Even so, discourse that would influence must be discourse free and powerful enough to be "given up" to interpretation by the other party. One can particularize meanings in any given writing, saying, "this is how I will use this term," but one cannot even be sure that one will use it that way without contradiction.

The Wooster Group's use of Arthur Miller's words from *The Crucible* is a difficult problem because of laws designed to protect the property of the artist. If there were no such laws, no artist could make a living from his or her art. But what is the limit of use? In the controversy, what Miller was most worried about was the control over the interpretation of the play; he saw the production of *The Crucible* in *LSD* as a form of ridicule, even though LeCompte did not. He was worried about future "correct" performances, especially "first-rate" ones in New York, a matter of the level of reception. Both *Our Town* and *The Crucible* are widely produced in high schools and small community theaters across the country—they are often among the first experiences of live theater that Americans have. LeCompte chose these texts for this reason, to examine ideological presuppositions but not to ridicule. Miller is probably not even aware of how his play is being performed in all these provincial locations, nor would he care. But for a notorious avant-garde theater company in New York to do his play "incorrectly," possibly altering future receptions of it at that level, is too much.

In *Route 1 & 9*, the Wooster Group's self-implication in what LeCompte calls "the chain of brutality," so that material read as racist is not distanced by any device within the performance that labels it as such, and presents the audience with the task of seeing its own unacknowledged racism, something which should make liberal audiences uncomfortable. But the group has also tried to contrast the *joie de vivre* of the blackface party with the puritanical rigidity and deadliness (the graveyard scene) of the white population of *Our Town*, as though racial stereotyping works both ways. But even if one "includes" oneself within a structure of racism without distancing

mechanisms, how can one expect the audience to perceive this inclusion critically and not simply as an affirmation of racist attitudes?[12] This same problem has occurred in art that draws attention to itself as "commodity" in order to critique commodification. It is similar to the formal appropriation that Fredric Jameson perceives as a "homeopathic strategy" against the forces of commodification.[13] In an article addressing the ethical basis of this assumption, and condemning what appears as the glibly racist, sexist and classist "commodity" art of Jeff Koons, black conceptual artist Adrian Piper has said: "A distanced moral perspective that criticizes morally vicious values merely by expressing them is no more of a genuinely distanced perspective than would be one that criticized child abuse by committing it."[14] A further complication: *who* is appropriating *what*? The fact that the comedy material originates when a black comedian appropriates stereotypes in order to use them against themselves, and then a white group "reappropriates" them in order to do the same, illustrates a naive lack of understanding of the cultural ramifications of this question.

We are brought up to a higher level of complexity regarding notions of appropriation (of materials and position) when we discuss the responsibility of the artist. This is a paradoxical situation because, on the one hand, the freedom of the artist must be respected and not chained to narrow ideas of political correctness; the artist cannot be held responsible for interpretations that draw certain conclusions where none are drawn in the work. On the other hand, where blatant provocation occurs that promotes a vicious response or identification on the part of the audience, responsibility does seem to accrue. But, as Piper also points out, the responsibility is to be placed less on the part of the artist than on the art community or market that legitimates such work through the attention it pays to it. "Transgression," as a fetish of the avant-garde, in appealing to the artist's purely narcissistic and willful side, can simply become *regression*, destructive of all human values.

This lack of responsibility is pointed to in LeCompte's condemnation of Timothy Leary, but is found as well in her own book. The idea of creating one scene by

[12]Auslander claims that the appropriation of racist imagery that "might confirm . . . what one deconstructs" is "mitigated" by the Wooster Group's own "deconstruction of presence" ("Toward a Concept of the Political," 28). However, given that LeCompte did not include any possible outside perspective on the racist partying, but chose to let the audience make up their own minds, one could hardly call that "deconstruction," but merely replication of the imagery of racist conditioning.

[13]Jameson has presented this notion of particular repetitive patterns "from Gertrude Stein to Robbe-Grillet," as homeopathic responses to the repetition of mass production, in his essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 136. Even if one accepts this idea, Jameson doesn't carry his metaphor far enough to match what has happened. Homeopathy is a method of dealing with a disease by injecting small doses of it into the body, enough to produce the symptoms. It then operates as a *pharmakos*, both poison and cure, activating the proper antibodies to create immunity to the disease. In order for it to be effective, *small doses* are required, just enough to produce symptoms. If one keeps injecting greater and greater doses, the immune system is overcome and the disease spreads throughout the body. It would then seem that the extensive proliferation of an art that is *only* homeopathically "resisting" forms of the dominant culture has in fact helped advance the disease it was supposedly trying to cure. This is what "Warholism" is all about.

[14]Adrian Piper, "A Paradox of Conscience, Analytic Philosophy and the Ethics of Contemporary Art Practice," *New Art Examiner* (April 1989): 31.

viedotaping the cast performing it while out of their minds on LSD is one way of giving up self-possession, and therefore responsibility for one's actions (an avoidance of the "appropriate"). Karen Finley claims that her texts are more spoken *through* her than created *by* her, a claim that relieves her of the criticism that the obsessions she identifies with social power structures are simply her own private obsessions. The sickness is out there, not just in here (or because it's out there it's in here).

Yet every point of responsibility given up by the artist is then placed on the audience as its responsibility. This is a familiar tale from the 1960s, in which chance, spontaneous, and random performances put the responsibility on the audience to "give form" to what it saw, supposedly increasing the freedom of the audience's perceptual decisions. In other words, the audience had to "work," while the performers could play, unconcerned with the outcome. Today it is up to the audience to work to distance and criticize what is often offensive material, while the performer simply "experiences" it.

On the other hand, as illustrated by the problems raised in lesbian performance, the desire to control interpretation and so prevent the audience from "appropriating" one's material by interpreting it in its own way (according to the dominant ideology, that is) *seems* to take all the responsibility for meaning, but ignores the inevitable variation of interpretation inherent in any form of communication. Such variations, if they fall outside of one's own "community of interpretation" are then labeled incorrect, or oppressive. The sharing in a particular set of meanings by marginalized or subcultural audiences is always done at the expense of the possible meanings a more heterogeneous audience would find there. The experience and analysis by the second audience in its usual way seems to rob the artist or her community of its "subversive" ownership of the image. What is deemed a subjective stance within the smaller community just becomes another cultural object in the larger commodified world. This is not only true for lesbians, but for all marginalized groups. At this point, against the reifying, or more exactly, commodifying, operations of the "information society" we can begin to see what the desire for subjectivity really means.

The question of "subjectivity" is really the question of having the power of assuring that one's own self-image is "correctly" received by others. It is predicated on the belief in an objective truth of one's own condition as defined by one's self, one's own "property." This is not strictly "subjectivity" *per se*, which cannot be perceived (it can only be deduced from the effects of its actions), but rather an "objectification of the subject"—which is best exemplified as a self-conscious role exhibited for others to "believe in." The argument often made that creates a Manicheean split between subject ("good") and object ("bad"), besides being phenomenologically naive (especially when it describes the operations of desire), misses the point that the question is really *how* and *by whom* the objectifying is being done, not that it is being done, period. Despite the fact that Jill Dolan claims that Finley "refuses to participate in the rules of representation by objectifying herself,"[15] Finley is indeed working to objectify herself, rather

[15]Dolan, "The Dynamics of Desire," 162.

than allowing conventional patriarchal systems of signification to objectify her. Appropriation, then, is a self-objectification made from materials at hand within the culture, driven by inner subjective desire, whose twisted form resists being returned to that culture as a depoliticized commodity.

The problem inherent in discourse about the positing of subjectivity and its acceptance by society has less to do with the nature of representation itself than with who owns the material basis for the production of that representation. It is less "*what* is said" than "*who* is saying it"—that is, who has the economic and political power to assure the potency of its meanings. We may find out in the long run that the difference posited between women's voices and men's voices if and when women gain more power, will not be as great as we think. The idea that the subjectivity of a certain class, race, or sex determines the object status of all others is based on the quantity of particular images reproduced and on the control of their *distribution*, not the inherent quality of thought or intellectual distinction. So the notion of "appropriation" in a real sense can only be effective when the means of representation are appropriated, rather than its products.

At the same time, resistance only makes sense if there is an alternative vision that allows us to think otherwise (whether implicit or explicit), and not only with the terms "given us": that is, to imagine a way of living or operating that is not solely defined by what we are transgressing, resisting, or deconstructing. There are those who are grateful to theorists like Baudrillard for telling them that to live otherwise is impossible, relieving them of the need to struggle to create other choices, providing what Erich Fromm called an "escape from freedom." The liberation that such deconstruction promotes can also be a mask for a slavery to tropes.

The primary problem of art that purports to be political is in its reception by the audience. Too often theorists who write about such theater assume that the audience is simply a projection of themselves, and that, since they desire a certain theatrical strategy to work (usually to illustrate an already assumed theory), it does indeed work for everyone. It is assumed without qualification that a particular strategy "undermines" or "subverts" or "resists," whatever representational system it is engaged with, whereas for other audience members without such agendas, these effects might not be experienced at all. In fact, the more sophisticated these strategies become in their use of irony, for instance, the more likely the opposite meaning will be assumed and be reinforced, not undermined. This is especially true if no alternative mode of perception or action is placed in a dialectical relationship to it.

As we have seen, transgression can be a martyr to its own effects. As in the flag-burning and desecration incidents, appropriative and transgressive acts are done less to stimulate dialogue than to increase alienation between groups, and to create a feeling of power among those who feel they have none. While transgression is used to undermine the power of hegemonic discourse through the appropriation and attempted devaluation of its images, that appropriation can then be reappropriated ironically into the hegemonic discourse once again. Geologists define transgression as "The spread of the sea over the land along a subsiding shoreline, producing an overlap by deposition of new strata upon old" (Oxford Universal Dictionary). The

transgression created by the ever-moving and subversive sea in fact helps to build new strata upon the land it is "transgressing." Every appropriative/transgressive act is less a true subversion of hegemonic ideology, in the name of another ideal, than it is a challenge to that ideology to increase the scope of its power over such divergent ideals and their representations.[16] This paradox is something that theater has always had to face in its attempt to provide a critical consciousness against reigning ideologies. But those ideologies are the ones that set the terms by which a critical theater practices its subversions. In concerning itself with subjectivity as only a problem of representation, theater can at best only have a reformist effect on consciousness, not a revoltionary one.

[16]In one sense, the appropriation artist of the 1980s who really set the scene was Ronald Reagan. He appropriated the rhetoric of the 1960s Left in order to lend a cosmetic sexiness to neo-conservative politics, and appropriated the rhetoric of Franklin Roosevelt in order to destroy all vestiges of New Deal social commitments.