The Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret

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Abstract

The Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret, part of the Hemispheric Institute’s 2003 Spectacle of Religiosities, was envisioned as a unified hemispheric “scream,” bringing together activists, artists and academics against the Bush Administration’s war-mongering and empire building. A nearly four-hour event, the Cabaret offered little opportunity for participation by audience members or those watching the event via webcast and created scant political aftermath or efficacy beyond the artistic expression of the performers themselves.

As pious terrorists, we represent the cutting edge of religion and performance, the veneration of holy violence. War and terror are spectacles of mutual provocation, TIT for tat. Politicians such as George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon represent the corporeal element of terror. Cynical intellectuals and perverse artists who mock and criticize religion, who work in the sacrilegious, scatological, and hedonistic, represent the intellectual and mental sphere of terror.

Artists inflame fundamentalism by keeping the public outraged so that they are ready for fundamentalist political leaders. You provoke, offend, and inflame the frightened masses of the world, inciting fear of God’s wrath. Artists are no men and women of peace at all, but terrorists of the soul. Do you rejoice when
Among the nightly performances at the 2003 Hemispheric Institute’s *Spectacle of Religiosities*, one event in particular was envisioned as a “hemispheric scream,” a sign to the world that not everyone in the United States supports the “war-mongering and empire building” of the Bush Administration. Inspired by the creativity of recent anti-war protests, Hemispheric Institute Director Diana Taylor proposed *The Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret* to show unity among the Americas, an interactive dialogue between scholars, activists and artists in attendance at the Institute in New York City and throughout North, South and Central America. (Taylor, May 29 2003)

One model for the event was an event held six weeks earlier, a “Scream Out” organized on June 9th by the Women’s Action Coalition in response to the Bush Administration’s infringements on civil liberties and free speech in the name of homeland security. Organized by performance artist Karen Finley, the Scream Out invited women artists, activists, and writers to speak out against specific policies and to respond with “a scream of rage and resistance, fury and frustration.” (Women’s Action Coalition, 2003) Performance artist Missy Galore literally brought the scream out with her to the Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret. Her performance included statements such as “the Bush administration took our fear, pain and confusion and turned it against us,” followed by gut-wrenching screams. Unfortunately, many, members of the audience were unfamiliar with the original Scream Out, and were left without the sense of continuity between the two events that her performance sought to create.

Martha Wilson, founding director of Franklin Furnace performance group and herself a
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A participant in the Scream Out, was invited to organize the Anti-War Anti-Empire Cabaret. Ricardo Dominguez of Electronic Disturbance Theatre was asked to create and maintain an interactive component, including a webcast and IRC chat. Taylor invited performance artist Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping to host the Cabaret. (Taylor, May 29 2003)

As envisioned, the event itself was a mix of rants, screams, performances, and songs. The nearly four-hour event featured 23 different performances, ranging from the Living Theatre’s *Not in My Name* anti-death penalty play to video of deformed fetuses in Iraq post-Desert Storm, a woman in pasties dancing to *Stop the War*, and a marine brushing his teeth bloody to the humming of the Star Spangled Banner.

But what began as a scream ended with a whimper. Less than two dozen audience members stayed throughout the onslaught of performances. The publicized open mic never happened, eliminating the possibility for the audience to raise their own voices of opposition. The IRC chat fizzled halfway through the show. Only one performance actually made use of the potential of interactive webcasting. The event itself turned away from being an international dialogue between artists and scholars and into a largely one-way performance from the stage to the audience, rarely traversing the “fourth wall”, representing the voices of the artists involved, but without concern for the voice of the audience or the impact of the event beyond the closing curtain.

**Political theatre and activist performance**

I have been an activist for over 15 years and have participated in anti-war rallies, several marches in Washington D.C., and organizing with environmental and human rights groups. I am frequently asked what rallies and marches actually accomplish. The subtext of that question, of course, is that they are pointless exercises that don’t really accomplish anything.
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While it’s true that such events rarely, in and of themselves, effect swift political change, they can be in effect, first shouts, scream outs, the raising of a collective voice. They initiate a call and response kindred spirits, act as a rallying point, a point of inspiration, and a point of contact. Rallies, marches and political events frequently “preach to the converted,” offering speeches and performances to those who feel passionately enough about the issue to come to the event. As such, they help to keep up the energy level and commitment of activists. They foster community by bringing people together around an issue and offering them the chance to talk, share perspectives, and play. They resemble religious revivals in which the faithful reaffirm their belief and offer witness before the entire world. Richard Schechner writes that events such as ACT-Ups die-ins or Greenpeace’s high seas environmental antics serve a dual function:

“No only does the media catch the event and broadcast it, but group members are also invigorated, reaffirming in public their belief in the cause and each other.” (Schechner 1993, 9)

Activist performance further mirrors religion in proselytization. Rallies and marches call out to those who might feel alone or disenfranchised. They offer a point of entry into political activity by their visibility. Thus they call people into movements and into action.

Finally, these events can send the message to political leaders and the public at large that there is a voice of opposition, another viewpoint. By bringing together groups of people, they show that it is not the lone voice crying in the wilderness, but a chorus, even a cacophony of voices, united in a common concern.

The introduction of theatricality into political events enhances all of these functions. They keep the event from turning into merely a series of speeches and interject spectacle. They allow participants to embody and perform other realities—to bring to life the realities of war, to demonstrate utopian ideals, to give voice to the disenfranchised or to those who have lost their
As pious terrorists, we represent the cutting edge of religion and performance, the veneration of holy violence. Die-ins during a time of war offer the visible and disturbing image of motionless bodies in the middle of the street, emergency sirens blaring, bringing the point home for spectators in a way that speeches, news articles and manifestos may never accomplish.

Diana Taylor describes repertoire as one function of activist performance, “stor[ing] and enact[ing] ‘embodied’ memory.” (Taylor 46:2, 155) These events and performances usually take place in non-theatrical, public spaces, “intrud[ing], unexpectedly, on the social body . . . .  It insists on physical presence.” (166)

While not a performance per se, Peaceful Tomorrows offered a moving testimony toward the beginning of evening. A group whose members all lost loved ones in the World Trade Center attack, Peaceful Tomorrows stands as a witness against retaliation, willing to value the lives of the people of Afghanistan and Iraq as much as the friends and families they lost on September 11th. They linked the idea of “collateral damage” in war time to the victims of the World Trade Center, who have become collateral damage in the war on terrorism and the quest for American imperialism as well. Just as performance seeks to embody those who have been rendered invisible, Peaceful Tomorrows seeks to put a human face on all victims of war and violence and to reclaim the memory of September 11th from appropriation by imperialist language and intent. In contrast to overtly activist performance, politically-themed theatre takes place within clearly-defined performance spaces, with specific texts, actors who have been trained or have rehearsed the performance, and a more clearly defined role between performer and audience than an activist performance, in which spectators can easily slip into the rally, the march, the chant, etc. The goals of politically-themed theatre can be similar to activist performance, including creating and embodying new social orders, giving voice to those who are “invisible”, honoring the dead, portraying heroes and villains, bringing historical events to life, etc.

Examples of this type of theatre can range from traditional plays like the holocaust-themed *Bent* or *The Diary of Anne Frank*, to experimental performance pieces like The Living Theatre’s...
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*Paradise Now,* to Anna Deveare Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror*, created from interviews with residents of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, after a period of racial violence.

In his work with political theatre, Augusto Boal creates a theatre that creates dialogue, “asks its audience questions and expects answers.” (Boal 1998, 20). Boal discusses “agit-prop” theatre in which “theatrical scenes would be shown as a preface to carrying out political actions: the scenes dealt with subjects which the speakers would debate moments later.” (213).

The Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret, in contrast, resembled more what Boal refers to as Continental Theatre, with an “intransitive relationship in that everything travels from the stage to the auditorium . . . and nothing goes the other way.” (20)

When asked about how the event had functioned as either political theatre or activist performance, Martha Wilson’s own understanding leaned more toward this type of theatre, focused on the expression of the performers rather than their impact on the audience.

> “the goal of theatre is the willing suspension of disbelief, while the goal of performance is to rub your nose in reality. Political theatre, however, bridges those two poles; and many performance artists are now quite interested in using the tricks of the theatre to create the willing suspension of disbelief.” (Wilson, July 25 2003)

What is missing from this description is an understanding of the aftermath of the performance. There is no expectation expressed here that the performance should serve any goals beyond talking to or at the audience, rather than engaging in a dialogue, or giving the audience any sense of efficacy of its own. That they should have their face rubbed in the political conditions of the day, along with some theatrical technique, lighting, or video, is all that can be expected. The potentially carnivalesque, party atmosphere of the event was inhibited by the persistence of the fourth wall, passive spectators sitting at tables watching performance after performance, rather than being invited to become directly involved in the action.
Reverend Billy made a small attempt at this when he exhorted the crowd not to let the goals and momentum of the event stop here. Likewise, the Living Theatre announced their upcoming *Not In My Name* event, to coincide with a scheduled execution, the following Tuesday in Times Square. However, even if the audience had been reached, agitated, incensed, motivated, there was nothing built into the evening to channel these feelings and passivity was largely the only response available to those offstage in the auditorium. Diana Taylor’s Performance Studies class entered the auditorium dancing and clapping, performing the Toyi Toyi, a South African chant used to praise or shame political leaders. After the class’s short performance among and directly in front of the audience, Reverend Billy picked up the gauntlet and continued the Toyi Toyi, with audience members calling out political figures such as Donald Rumsfeld or Tony Blair to be shamed.

The Living Theatre also entered through the auditorium rather than by the wings, and during their performance came out into the audience, making anti-violence pact with audience members, pledging not to kill one another, participate in war, the death penalty, or other acts of violence. They then brought audience members onstage with them for their finale.

Gecko’s *Duck and Cover* presentation used Red Scare era video showing school children taught to hide under their desks during a nuclear attack. Both the performer and host Reverend Billy tried to encourage audience members to practice their duck and cover skills, but few actually participated.

Given that the June 9th Scream Out was one of the inspirations for the Cabaret, it is interesting to examine the Scream Out’s own stated methods. An event with tremendous potential for audience interaction and public intervention, the flyers and press releases for the event emphasize only the participation of writers, artists and activists, rather than inviting spectators to be prepared to scream out for themselves. Its methods and message, like that of the Anti-War, Anti-Empire
As pious terrorists, we represent the cutting edge of religion and performance, the veneration of holy violence (Women’s Action Coalition, 2003)

**Whose avant-garde is it anyway?**

For contemporary activists, Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies (Youth International Party) of the Vietnam War era embodied the greatest potential of political theatre. In his autobiography, Hoffman described the “langage of protest” as theatre rooted in myth and ritual (Hoffman 1980, 129). Yippie theatrics included running a pig for President of the United States and an aborted attempt to levitate the Pentagon and exorcise it of evil. “Spiritual purification,” Hoffman explained, “is sought as an antidote to the demons present in all imperialist war machines” (192) The goal of guerrilla theatre or “monkey warfare” was “to extend the possibilities of involving the senses and penetrating the symbolic world of culture.” (126) Decades later, such goals seem ideally suited to an event such as the Spectacle of Religiosities, bringing together politically engaged artists and academics from throughout the Americas.

Instead of embodying these principles, however, the performances were frequently merely derivative of Vietnam Era war protests, lacking contemporary music, images or references relevant to the current cultural and political climate. Pirate Jen did offer a piece called *Bushwhacked* and used “The Real Slim Shady” by rap artist Eminem, for an audience sing-along. But the dominant music of the evening was pre-1975. *America’s* “Horse With No Name” was the basis for the song “War with No Shame.” In an image reminiscent of the 1960s variety show *Laugh-In*, Julie Atlas Muz danced to *War* and *Stop the War* wearing only pasties and bikini-type briefs. Youth performance group Dance Tube entered in business shirts and socks, pantless and half-naked. They kicked an inflatable globe as a soccer ball while showing protest video from the 1970s including performers in Nixon masks and a die-in. The performers then stripped into a pile of naked crawling bodies that was more reminiscent of 1960s Living Theatre than the
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Living Theatre’s own performance of the evening.

That the current political and artistic avant-garde owes much to the 1960s is clear, but their reliance on the images and music of that era, nearly 40 years ago, confirms what Richard Schechner says about the absence of a contemporary avant-garde:

“What were once radical activities in terms of artistic experimentation, politics, and lifestyles, have become a cluster of alternatives open to people . . . offer (ing) no surprises in terms of theatrical techniques, themes, audience interactions, or anything else.” (Schechner 1993, 8)

Several of the poets who performed did offer a contemporary framework in their segments. Karen Jaime spoke of homegrown terrorist Timothy McVeigh as a way of highlighting racial profiling, pointing out that no one began boycotting white people, pulling over boys with buzz cuts, etc., after Oklahoma City in the way that Arab Americans were targeted after September 11th. Pamela Sneed’s narrative work wove together themes of white privilege, AIDS, the lack of U.S. concern for the massacre in Rwanda, and the bare space and unspeakable loss of the Twin Towers. Unfortunately, both performances came in the last hour of the event as the audience had significantly dwindled.

Singer Chris Rael performed a song about the public relations war being waged against activists, incorporating quotes from pundit Anne Coulter who calls political dissenters “traitors”.

Simultaneously, Rael presented a video by Nancy Buchanan showing research on deformities due to agent orange sprayed in Vietnam with research of fetal deformities in Iraq in the 12 yeas since the first Gulf War, managing to link Vietnam era and contemporary politics in an effective and meaningful way.

**Cabarets and Politics**

Throughout their history, cabarets have always contained an element of resistance, whether openly political or not—flaunting artistic, sexual and social mores and sometimes even the law.
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Given this convergence of openness and artistic democracy, the cabaret seems an appropriate format for presenting political and activist theatre.

The cabaret itself dates back to 1881, when the Hydropathes Literary Society first met at the Chat Noir in Montmarte, France to recite poetry and to perform skits, monologues and songs. The format quickly became a favorite of the Paris bohemians. Over the years, the cabaret format has been adapted by mainstream and avant-garde literary and performance movements. The Dadas used Cabaret Voltaire to mock literary and artistic conventions through their use of simultaneous performance, bruitism (the art of noise to provoke a reaction), nonsenical sound poems, and the creation and destruction of temporary works of visual art. (Hall-Downs, 2002)

In the 1920s and 30s, burlesque cabaret flourished in the U.S. and Europe, particularly known through the gangster speakeasies of American Cities and the bawdy vaudevillian shows of Weimar Berlin. The mobster speakeasies provided alcohol, illegal under Prohibition. The cabarets of Berlin offered satire and flaunted sexual liberation. Decades later, in the 1970s, the cabaret movement became associated with camp and gay culture. (Kenrick 1996-2003).

In the 1980s, one stream of the cabaret movement became the starting place for very mainstream off-Broadway musicals, including Nunsense, Forever Plaid, and Forbidden Broadway. At the same time, the self-publishing and ‘zine revolution, combined with the punk/DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos of youth culture led to an explosion of literary and artistic open mics where artists gathered to create community and to promote and share their own works by performing and by hawking their self-produced wares at these events. The poetry slam movement grew out of this open mic culture and in this way, owes a debt to the cabaret format as well.

With an open mic or poetry slam, any artist can bring their work to the microphone, which encourages political as well as artistic freedom to the work presented. While not functioning strictly as open mics where performers can walk in off the street and be on the slate that night,
many artistic cabarets are uncurated. That is, no one auditions, provides a proposal, or is screened before they are booked into the show. Such events are seen as democratic, open to a variety of styles, genres, subject matter, and even experience levels among performers.

This was Martha Wilson’s approach in booking the Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret. “I felt that anyone who wanted to rant should be allowed to do so.” (Wilson, July 23, 2003) In this instance, however, the uncurated aspect of the show did not serve the goals of the Hemispheric Institute nor the cabaret itself. The sheer number of performances, and the unfocused variety of themes, left the audience exhausted and overwhelmed, unable to process the information or respond to it in a meaningful way during the evening. Many members of the audience voted with their feet hours before the end of the show, seeing only a fraction of the acts.

Wilson herself, performed last in the line up with less than two dozen people scattered throughout the auditorium. As Barbara Bush she told the story of her two wayward sons, Saddam and George W., playing out a “sibling rivalry” on the world stage, and bragged about being the wife and mother of two presidents. The piece was contemporary and like Lex Talibinos who performed immediately before her, potentially funny and disturbing, but it went largely unnoticed by the weary smattering of an audience that remained.

The symbiosis between the cabaret and the open mic was not missed by the organizers of the Hemispheric Institute, as the event was billed as featuring an open mic, an event that would have allowed members of the audience to participate as artists offering their own work, or as citizens coming to the microphone to make a statement, a rant or a scream. Thus, despite Wilson’s assertion, not “everyone who wanted to rant” was given the opportunity.

The number and diversity of acts and performers, while portraying a scope of resistance, lacked enough of a united thread to be able to create any kind of palpable cohesive message. Just as WTO protests of 2000 were criticized for not having a unified vision, but representing a
mishmash of groups and messages thrown together in an amorphous melting pot of grievances, the cabaret offered up a political cacophony that actually hindered any outcome beyond its own scream. As both an organizing tool and a message of resistance, its effect was limited at best.

**The web as an organizing tool**

Ricardo Dominguez’s *Electronic Disturbance Theatre* creates “electronic art that debates . . . issues, provides an arena for further action [and] . . . employs technology to revert surveillance into documenting the abuses of power and inciting direct action.” (Salgado, 2003) He was initially invited to create and oversee a webcast element of the Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret. Once the event began to take shape, Dominguez found that the technical aspects had been handled by NYU and he took the role of spectator rather than active participant.

Dominguez concedes that with a cabaret, creating a dialogue via video streaming is somewhat specious. “Video streaming online is still extremely limited potential. Webcasting real-time events has a strong tendency to become uni-directional.” (Dominguez, July 24 2003) The greatest potential of webcasting an event such as this is its capacity to “use the performance as a platform for discussing what possible actions might be developed based on the issues that the performance brought to the foreground.” But to achieve this, he cautions, “(w)ebcasting is a case where less becomes more . . . allow(ing) the chat component to become chorus like. Too many performances all at one time make it difficult to develop direct-action dialogue.” (Dominguez, July 24 2003)

Alexander Del Re and Dan McKereghan made use of webcasting technology to present a joint video performance taking place simultaneously in New York and Chile. The event linked the World Trade Center attack with “the other 9/11,” the overthrow and assassination of president Allende of Chile in 1973 by the CIA. A voiceover of George Bush repeats “The struggle of humanity against tyranny is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” Statistics compare the
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almost equal number of dead from both attacks. Meanwhile, each performer maintains a “live” presence throughout via webcasting, running, dancing, pouring piles of sand (ash?) onto the floor in their respective rooms. The piece ends with a person entering the auditorium at NYU just as McKereghan enters Times Square, each of them wearing a t-shirt that says “I am afraid of Americans.”

Despite the unrealized potential of the webcast to create a dialogue, it did offer the opportunity to reach people outside of the immediate event. Dr. Antonio Prieto Stambaugh, of El Colegio de Michoacan in Zamora, Michoacan, Mexico, watched the webcast with his students. In an email to Diana Taylor, he described the cabaret as “fun to watch, although . . . it was like watching a telecast, no reference to people who might want to participate or send messages overseas. Overall . . . it was very important for my students to see how performers, activists and academics can come together and do a political act that is at the same time entertaining and conceptually challenging.” (Stambaugh, July 18, 2003)

“Bad artists,” Grotowski tells us, “speak of rebelling; real artists actually rebel. They respond to the powers that be with a concrete act.” (Schechner 1993, 14). The Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret unfortunately fell into the former category. While there were a number of competent performances, the Cabaret overall offered little in the way of actual, concrete rebellion, but merely spoke, danced, and sang around the idea.

Appendix A:

Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret

Line Up

Host: Reverend Billy
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Diana Taylor, Manifesto from Latin America
Dawn Peterson, Peaceful Tomorrows
Performance Studies Class, Toyi Toyi
Alexander Del Re & Dan McKereghan, Video feeds NY & Chile
Galinsky, War with no shame
Leonora Champagne, Monologue about maintaining her daughter’s innocence
Irina Danilova, Project 59
The Living Theatre, Not in My Name
Nora York, Masters of War & Battle Hymn of the Republic
Marguerite Van Cook, Monologue with video
Renato Rosaldo, Poetry
Jenny Romaine, “Bushwhacked”
Maciej Toporowicz, Brushing teeth bloody to Star Spangled Banner
Chris Rael, Music, video of research on deformities due to Agent Orange/compare w/Iraq
Dancetube, Group movement with video
Gecko, Duck & Cover
Jennifer Edwards, Spoken word poetry
Jeff McMahon, Excerpt from “Hell”
Missy Galore, Pleasure Revolution Scream Out
Karen Jaime, Spoken word poetry with music
Pamela Sneed, Spoken word text
Julie Atlas Muz, Dancing to “Stop the War”
Stephen Wangh, Lex Talibonis
Martha Wilson, Barbara Bush

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As pious terrorists, we represent the cutting edge of religion and performance, the veneration of holy violence.


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As pious terrorists, we represent the cutting edge of religion and performance, the veneration of holy violence


Stambaugh, Dr. Antonio Prieto. “We saw the cabaret,” Email to Diana Taylor and Karen Young, July 18, 2003. Used with permission of Diana Taylor.

Taylor, Diana, “Anti-War, Anti-Empire Cabaret” Email with Martha Wilson, Reverend Billy, Ricardo Dominguez, May 29, 2003. Used with permission of Diana Taylor.


Wilson, Martha, “Re: Questions about the Anti-Empire Cabaret from an MA Student,” Email with Laura Winton, July 24, 2003 and July 25, 2003.

The First Opium War (Chinese: 第一次鴉片戰争; pinyin: Dìyīcì Yāpiàn Zhāng), also known as the Opium War or the Anglo-Chinese War, was a series of military engagements fought between Britain and the Qing dynasty of China. The immediate issue was Chinese official seizure of opium stocks at Canton to stop the banned opium trade, and threatening the death penalty for future offenders. The British government insisted on the principles of free trade, equal diplomatic recognition among nations, and backed the One speaks against empire and war with the emphasis on empire, tends to avoid advocating nonviolence, has little to say about alternative means of conflict resolution without war, usually likes the term "revolution" and sometimes advocates for violent revolution or revolution by any means available or "necessary." The other speaks against war and empire with the emphasis on war, promotes the tools of nonviolent activism, disarmament, new structures to replace war, and doesn't have anything to say about the "right to armed defense or the supposed choice between violence and "lying down and do In recent months it has not been just Covid that raised the temperature in Europe's hotheads: Cold War fever has set in among the Brussels leadership, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel rallying the troops against public enemy number one, the Russian Federation. Today I see a similar parallelism in the roll-out of Cold War policies in the USA under Biden and in Europe under von der Leyen. Why is this relevant to day-to-day developments?