

**Capitalism is Here to Stay:
An Appraisal of the Complicated Relationship Between
Art, Art-Making, and the Marketplace**

By Sarah Levitt

Rather than describe what I mean when I say “participatory art-making practices,” I invite you to experience it from wherever you are reading this writing. First, take note of your posture: notice if your arms are crossed, if both feet rest on the floor, if your head is slightly tilted. Now, change something about your body’s position: lengthen your spine, put your hand on your knee. Change something else by taking your hands away from your body. Write your name in the air with your fingertips; write your name in the air with your forehead; with your right shoulder; now choose a body part and write your name again. As you move, observe what other motion or stillness is happening around you.

This short exercise represents a very low-stakes, small-scale experience of a participatory art-making practice, which can be broadly defined as an activity that engages spectators or members of some community in the practice of creating art. These practices, which take a variety of forms, are used to address social issues, build communities, or simply change the relationship between audience members and performers. They are often considered emancipatory for the ways in which, through challenging the spatial and social separation of artist and audience, they give agency to the spectator. Having been a member of a multi-generational dance company for six years in which much of our work involved designing and implementing participatory practices for non-dancers, I deeply value opening up the creative process and providing multiple entry points to art making. But recently, I have begun to question the valorization of participatory art practices as exemplars of democratic values, radicalism, and non-hierarchical modes of engaging across difference. Because participatory art practices change the nature of an audience’s engagement with art from spectator to participator/performer/creator (depending on

the project), these practices are often thought to be anti-capitalist in nature. They disturb the traditional relationship of audience and performer, troubling the idea that artistic work is created for consumption by a passive spectator.

My questioning about the efficacy and political value of these practices and modes of engagement has led me to examine the nature of dance artists' relationship with the marketplace throughout the history of American modern, postmodern, and contemporary dance. Participatory art practices merely represent the latest incarnation of how American dance forms have attempted to stage their autonomies by creating or diminishing the distance between dance and the marketplace, institutions, and audiences. Notably, the 1960s was a period in which one of the major projects of visual and performing artists was questioning the relationship of artistic process to artistic product. By challenging the status of art as a product to be bought and sold, artists' work provided a critique of consumerism and capitalism. But, in examining the contemporary arts fields today, and in particular dance, it seems that this indictment of capitalism persists without any significant changes to the economic conditions in which artists work, meaning both that capitalism is alive and well, and artists are still pretty broke. Although modern and contemporary choreographers often try to critique or distance themselves from the marketplace through their artistic practices, Stas Kleindiest notes in "Between Resistance and Commodity," that "it is not possible to produce any real critical discourse within the existing art systems simply because most forms of resistance are so quickly converted into consumable forms" (4).

If the artistic practices that developed in postmodern art during the 1960s acted as a rejection of modernist principles as well as a form of resistance to post-World War II consumerism, how have these once-radical strategies entered the mainstream through practices

of institutionalization and absorption into marketing tactics? And, can art processes and products truly offer substantial opposition to dominant economic systems?

Attempting to sever art's ties with the marketplace was certainly not a new idea when postmodern artists took it up in the 1960s. Modern artists of the 1940s and 50s sought to find autonomy of form to distinguish themselves aesthetically and politically from ballet, and autonomy from the marketplace. In *A Game for Dancers*, Gay Morris notes, "fields never gain complete autonomy from larger social forces; rather they are semiautonomous, having their own histories through which they refract outside influences" (xvii). And yet, modern dancers in the post-war period attempted to resist the forces of politics and the American marketplace by cementing the status of their form as "high art," distinct from popular entertainment that grew out of and fed capitalism (Morris 3). Morris describes a number of writers, from dance critics like Horton Foote and Gertrude Lippincott to art critics like Clement Greenberg, who emphasized the need for avant-garde forms to remain independent from market forces, entertainment, and commercialization as a counterpoint to mass culture (1, 4, 5). And in contrast to the dancers subsidized by the Works Progress Association's Federal Dance Project in the late 1930's, and subsequent calls for governmental support, dancers following World War II "became distrustful of any idea of government support, seeing it as compromising their independence" (Franko 16, Morris 5).

John Martin, the preeminent *New York Times* dance critic who coined the term "modern dance," saw this emerging form as the beginning of something entirely new. At once a rebellion against classical and romantic forms, modern dance situated movement as substance, rather than decoration. In "Characteristics of the Modern Dance," first published in 1933, Martin states, "the dance became for the first time an independent art...completely self-contained, related directly to

life, subject to infinite variety” (258). Typified by the work of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Anna Sokolow, modern dance transmitted the inner life of the choreographer outward through idiosyncratic, expressive movement. In keeping with the modernist tenet of universality, dances of the time period attempted to speak to shared issues and values that were believed to transcend cultural and national boundaries. Literalism and narrative were frowned upon because they made art accessible, and “vanguard art was aimed not at a broad public but at a small group of peers who chose to ignore the market” (Morris 31).

Even as modern dancers preached autonomy, progressive academic institutions, like the New School for Social Research in New York City and Black Mountain College in Asheville, NC, embraced the avant-garde of dance, music, and visual art. Beginning in 1923 at the New School, director Alvin Johnson hired artists to teach courses in an adult education program. Artists who held positions there in the 1920s-1930s include composer Aaron Copland, choreographer Doris Humphrey, and critics John Martin and Meyer Schapiro. John Cage arrived there in the 1950s, and, Sally Banes notes in *Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance: A Hidden History of University Patronage in the United States*, his students included Allan Kaprow and Robert Dunn, who would go on to teach the composition course that instigated much of the activity of the first wave of postmodern choreographers (Banes 228). In her study on the relationship between artists and institutions, Banes highlights the fallacy of the romantic notion of the artist on the fringes:

...in stressing the ingenuity, nonconformism, and agonism of advanced experiments in performance, this narrative fails to acknowledge two key points. One is that the avant-garde has regularly formed its own alternative institutions, which in turn have been co-opted by the mainstream to become establishment

schools and venues. The second is that, particularly in post-World War II America, intellectual and religious organizations—in particular colleges, universities, and churches—have played a central role in the development of avant-garde performance, serving as research and development centers, venues, catalysts, and patrons (217).

By the time postmodern dancers staged their own critique of the market, the once avant-garde practices of modern dance had already been institutionalized as university dance programs. The University of Milwaukee’s program actually began in 1926, growing up alongside American modern dance; The Ohio State University’s dance program began in 1968.

Deeply connected to burgeoning counter-culture political and social movements of the 1960s, Sally Banes notes in *Terpsichore in Sneakers* that “the dances of the early post-modern choreographers were not cool analyses of forms but urgent reconsiderations of the medium” in which “a spirit of permissiveness and playful rebellion prevailed, foreshadowing the political and cultural upheavals of the late sixties” (Banes xvii). But, in *Sharing the Dance*, Cynthia Novack points to the similarities in values between modern and postmodern dance: “Dancers in both periods held ideologies of social consciousness and radicalism, often intentionally establishing connections between movement ideas and social concepts” (23). These shared concerns, however, manifested themselves in drastically different aesthetic outcomes.

“Postmodern dance” remains challenging to define because of its breadth of values, as well as its differences from postmodernism within visual arts and architecture (Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* xiv). With an awareness of its resistance to one agreed-upon definition, Roger Copeland’s characteristics of postmodern dance provides a useful guide for understanding the range of dance movement and choreographic practices during the 1960s:

A list of this sort would include (but not necessarily be limited to) works that utilized pedestrian, unstylized, or found movement; works that can be successfully performed by people who possess no formal dance training; works that conceive of choreography as the execution of a “task” assigned to the performer, works that are rigorously anti-illusionistic; and works that unfold in objective or clock-time rather than a theatrically-condensed or musically abstract time” (32).

The postmodern aesthetic in dance came not just as a reaction to the values of the modern dance and ballet, but as a voice of disapproval amidst an explosion of consumerism in the form of objects, ideologies, and status that emerged following World War II (May 312). Visual artists of the period, such as Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenberg were problematizing the very notion of a saleable art object, utilizing practices that “undid the boundaries between art and audience, between art object and world, thus merging art with its environment and everyday life and contesting the conservative function of the museum” (Best and Kellner 181).

The early postmodern choreographers, like Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton, took on this project from their own object-less lineage, rebelling against the modern dance of the past, and even against the more recent chance experiments by Merce Cunningham. Cunningham, the bridge between modern and postmodern dance, was still very much tied to the use of a trained, “dancer-ly” body to perform his experiments, and the first-wave postmodern artists rejected that too, opting to appropriate a “pedestrian” movement vocabulary that challenged acceptable Western notions of virtuosity and beauty in work that was performed in both theaters and alternative spaces.

It is important to acknowledge the economic undercurrents that provided the stable foundation which allowed artists to innovate, as well as to criticize the system. Cynthia Novack writes,

The temporary economic expansion experienced during the 1960s created conditions which allowed for the simultaneous development of both formal and organizational possibilities in dance. Experimentation with new ideas could be realized in a period of relative economic ease; young dancers and students lived inexpensively in cities like New York and San Francisco on the money brought in by part-time work and helpful families. Greater numbers of dancers were able to band together to perform, and the number of aspiring choreographers increased dramatically” (43).

Fast-forward to today: contemporary dance, the catch-all label for the forms that came after modern dance and postmodern dance, encompasses an even wider range of aesthetics and values than their predecessors: sometimes it looks like ballet, sometimes it does not look like dance, sometimes it involves trained dancers, sometimes it involves audience members as prime players in a performance. The egalitarian, non-hierarchical turn taken in postmodern dance in the 1960s and 1970s, in which dancers eschewed overt classical technique in favor of democratic ideals, manifests itself today in performance experiments in which trained artists are not the central focus, but rather the creators of an experience for the audience.

Sleep No More by Punchdrunk, a British theater company, fosters direct interaction between audience and performer in an immersive environment in which audiences determine their pathways through the performance; Faye Driscoll’s *Thank You For Coming* challenges the audience-performer relationship by giving certain audience members tasks, props and costumes; Headlong Dance Theatre devises performances for families in Philadelphia in which they work

collaboratively with participants to make site-specific dances in their homes to be performed for friends and family (*Sleep No More, Thank You For Coming, This Town is a Mystery*)

If Richard Schechner's belief that "proscenium theatre is a model of capitalism," is true, it would seem that postmodern and contemporary artists have developed new models for performance in relation to capitalism by challenging theatrical conventions, and giving audiences greater agency in how they engage with a performance work (Kolb 32). But, Alexandra Kolb notes in *Political Trends in Contemporary Choreography: A Political Critique*, "participatory art today occupies a different space than it did a few decades ago, often mirroring rather than challenging accepted features of business, political, and social life" (48). Instead of seeing these artistic practices as innovative, Kolb wonders if artists are "no longer undermining the market but simply adjusting to its logic" (48). And, the exchange goes both ways: businesses employ the same strategies as artists to engage the audience member/consumer. Kolb states,

The production of interactive experiences, the immersion of the "guest" in or within the product, the individuation and personalization of affects tailored toward the participant (consumer), the emphasis on process rather than product, the highlighting of physicality, the engagement of the senses, the creation of themes or multiple spaces—all are objectives shared both by recent performance and developments in corporate marketing (42).

If you have ever set foot in an Apple store, you will recognize this creation of an "experience," for a "guest" rather than a "consumer," which does not mean you will spend any less money. As an artist, part of me finds it immensely disappointing that art cannot truly provide an effective strategy of resistance because it is already tied to the institutions it critiques, and its artistic practices are often borrowed as methods to sell more iPhones.

But I also wonder: Like that tree that may or may not have made noise as it fell in the woods, can art have an impact if it cannot be seen, named, and sold? Institutions provide ways for the arts to have a reach and a multi-faceted effect in the world. So, perhaps this attempt at critique fails to change the system directly, but I think it does something else. In performing strategies of critique and resistance in process and product, art, Adrian Kear notes, following Rancière, “consists in revealing the distance, and the difference, between a social situation and its representation.” And, in this distance, the space for imagination is created to envision new strategies, new possibilities, and new ways of living. Artistic practices, although they may not “do” anything in regards to changing infrastructure or modes of economic exchange, instead provide an embodied example of practices of resistance and critique, empowering audience members and participants to effectively imagine and work toward new systems.

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