

WORDS, LIFE, AND ALL:
Language, Performativity and
Engagement in the Theater

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance
at Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Performance Curation

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A dedication.

First: To Sam Miller, who built it so that we would come. Thank you for finding a spot at the table for me. To Noémie Solomon, who kept me on the right path, and to Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, who convinced me that this work mattered and illuminated the way forward. To this brilliant triumvirate, I offer profound gratitude.

To Pam, Judy, Nicole, Mari, Steven, Katie, Eric, and the rest of the ICPP faculty. To Anya, David, Hannah, and the rest of the support team who tolerated all of my (late) emails and found all of my misplaced belongings. Thank you.

To Cori, Jessica, Christy, Jaamil, Michele and Katrina, with whom I shared this journey, and to Randy, Megan, Julie, and John who led the way. You inspire and amaze, and I am humbled to part of this cohort.

To Tim and the CSR team who kept it all going during the past two years. To Ashley, for all of the walks and tea.

To Kristen, Jaynie and Susan, for finding the time to talk to me, and for the inspiration. Thank you for the work you do in the world.

To Kelly Jean who read me so many times. Your encouragement and guidance got this done. To Mike, for the formatting. I hope I got it right.

To Dr. Maia Butler and the #AcWri team for the accountability and brilliance. To Jesse for the thoughts, and to Steve for the books.

To my family, especially my grandmother, who never doubted I would finish.

This is to all of you.

However. This thesis is *for* Rich, my Rich, who said that I could do it, told me I should do it, and who did everything he could to ensure success. Your patience is endless. Your inspiration is a gift. This is for you, love.

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Introduction

This thesis assesses the method and result of a linguistic approach for transmitting the qualitative impacts of new performance adopted by two New York City–centric theater companies. Drawing on the distinctly innovative curatorial models employed by the Public Theater’s “Public Works” program and the New Georges theater company to broaden community access to their works, I suggest an applicable method for deepening community engagement. To argue its case, this thesis pays particular attention to the theories of performativity, a type of theatrical and linguistic analysis more common to performance studies than to curatorial studies. Performativity constitutes action or a “doing,” as defined by linguistic scholar J.L. Austin. The most often cited performative is the phrase, “I do,” which instantiates a union of two individuals. When uttered in the proper context a wedding, the phrase constitutes an action and joins the individuals in marriage. Decades of scholars have used Austin’s theory as a base for identity and linguistic exploration, including Judith Butler and her well-known work on gender and social identity. In this thesis, I suggest that the theater companies use connotative performatives as much as denotative ones. Whether it is the simple effectiveness of the New Georges name evoking a lineage of radical feminist rule-breakers, or the reiteration of The Public’s goal to serve a general municipal community in a program that calls upon a triple entendre of utilities, labor, and success, speech acts can be potently employed by artists and institutions. This power of language to name, identify, and ultimately act is heavily informed by a tradition in linguistic philosophy and presents an opportunity for the theater at large.

1. Context of the Public Sphere and Theater's Role in Bridging Divides

Since I began this work in June of 2016, the public sphere in the United States has undergone a series of shocks, shifts, and slides. A contested Presidential political race produced divisive rhetoric as two highly unpopular candidates competed for the most powerful executive political office, with tensions between various populations dominating a vitriolic 24-hour news and social media cycle. As evidenced by a widespread resurgence of political protests, mass disruptions and confusion of sweeping executive orders, the shakeup since the inauguration in mid-January 2017 juxtaposes a resistance movement against a celebratory one, revealing a deeply split and disconnected populace. Federal vs. States rights, the desired role of the government pitted against the perceived rights of an individual, and an uneven and uncertain economic terrain combine, among many other factors, to create a fraught, insecure, frequently uncivil society. Conversation across the nation foments on the implications of once-established values and ideals, such as truth and scientifically proven facts. Essentials and guiding principles that were once a given in our society are now openly questioned and discarded. While observing this upset, transformation, and discord, fears for the future manifest a desire to help and heal result in a turn toward the arts that have been a touchstone in my life.

The role of the arts in communities emerges in times of crisis. This thesis is a hope of a timely intervention to the sector in the form of an additional approach to advocating for and supporting this work that can find commonalities, generate empathy, and teach toward a shared humanity. More than ten years after the Culture Wars that resulted in the public devaluing of the arts in the United States, Donna Walker-Kuhne wrote on the specialized power of community-building that can happen in the arts as she outlined development and outreach strategies for

organizations who needed to re-think existing models. "...[Art] is the only tool we have that successfully crosses ethnic and cultural barriers, bridges misunderstanding, erases social strife and celebrates our shared humanity."¹ Lived experiences of being one among many in an enraptured audience convince me of the power of collective. I remain convinced that the work and leadership of artists and artistic communities are essential in these unprecedented times of division. The arts possess the power to bring people together and build connective links from fractured isolation. That this capacity is among the best parts of our shared humanity is a deeply held tenet that fuels artists and artistic organizations. Jill Dolan, in the introduction to *Utopia in Performance*, brilliantly expresses this concept as a hope for a better future: "I believe that being passionately and profoundly stirred in performance can be a transformative experience useful in other realms of social life" (15). I whole-heartedly agree that this potential for betterment is "one that can be captured and claimed in performance" (3). This thesis is my hope that we can build a better society by harnessing the power in the arts, and that language plays a critical role in this process. I examine some of the existing discourse around the performing arts, with a focus on theater, in order to enhance advocacy so that we fully empower performance to heal and connect in these fractured and challenging times.

2. Positionality: Perspectives from a Theater Artist, Professional, and Advocate

My background is in performance, and my first training was in the theater. I imagined, created, supported, studied, and aspired to perform in every discipline from music to dance, ultimately finding a joyous practice in theatrical hybrids. Performance shared simultaneously

¹ Walker-Kuhne names the arts as a collective singular, unlike this thesis.

between individuals and a group who are undergoing or observing the same art but not necessarily having the same experience or reception is a fantastical space of possibility, and my fascination with video games and narrative brings a particular focus to my personal theatrical study. The blending of collective and individual responses is a fertile ground upon which to explore stories, to induce catharsis, and play with perceptions. When thinking about the state of challenges and opportunities in theater today, I consider the changing natures and demands on and of audiences, of what it takes to nurture new artists and creators, of how to create sustainable economies and exchanges that help work, communities, and artists flourish. In an increasingly complicated landscape with more competition for audiences and resources, can theater thrive? The field struggles even to agree on the spelling of “theater” in this country: does it end in an –er or in an –re? Although minor, this inconsistent stylistic representation might indicate the lack of cohesion across the discipline. (This thesis uses the more prevalent “theater” spelling common to American English, consistent with the Associated Press Stylebook.) For theater to heal or build community in a politically fractured environment and compete for attention from a technologically distracted populace, it must simultaneously solve problems and overcome obstacles while innovating the attraction of new audiences, commanding attention, remaining relevant, and successfully advocating for more financial and community support.

3. Funding as an Evaluative Metric

One method of evaluating the arts in a society is to examine the support it receives from various governmental bodies. At the Federal level in the United States, direct support for the arts — both for artists and institutions — largely comes from the National Endowment for the Arts

(NEA). Founded in 1965 by an act of Congress to support domestic arts and cultural development, funding levels increased from the first budget in 1966 until 1979. Initially conceived during the Cold War as a strategic investment to encourage innovation and creativity, funding for the arts and sciences increased, with governmental agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency using engagement with the arts to push their agendas (Hyde 373). For the NEA, however, funding would peak in 1979, when fiscal and cultural conservatism have successfully lobbied for reduced funding levels each successive year. The highly publicized battles during the Culture Wars in the early 1990s resulted in the current reality where “the production of culture [has been] effectively ceded to those who could find the money to do it,” (Chang 114). As reported by Americans for the Arts, funding for the NEA has sharply decreased since 1992, with budgets failing to even keep pace with inflation. This is arguably flawed fiscal policy, as artists and arts institutions produce deep-felt economic effects. For example, in 2013 “Arts and Culture Production” contributed to 4.2 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, a share that is larger than transportation, tourism or agriculture (Americans for the Arts). It is apparent, then, that governmental support for the arts does not reflect an investment in this sub-economy. If value is measured solely by financial support from the federal government, the value of American arts and culture diminishes more with each passing year. For artists and artistic institutions to continue to work and create, resources must then be found elsewhere, either from the private sector, individuals, or by developing alternative sources of income. Against this twenty-five-year history of diminishing federal funding, President Trump has publicly stated that eliminating the NEA budget is a part of his intention for curtailing government spending. The fact that this funding represents a paltry percentage of the overall federal budget does not factor into the arithmetic driving the decision (Bolton). This de-valuing by defunding of the arts does

not align with public sentiment, as a 2015 IPSOS poll commissioned by Americans for the Arts entitled “Americans Speak Out About the Arts” reveals that 87 percent of people believe that the arts are important to their quality of life (4). That the United States government is not committed to investing in the arts despite the expression of value is an indicator of the diminished role of the arts in political and social priorities. When directly contrasting with public opinion, the value of the arts in the United States seems difficult to quantify solely by governmental support.

4. Valuation: More than Money

Another way of looking at artistic value involves observing and recognizing the reflexive nature of the relationships that recognize and nurture artists and their work. A 2003 report by the Urban Institute titled “Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for U.S. Artists” examines the obstacles and overall landscape for artists across the nation, noting trends across the sector and identifying areas for improvement. The report leads by establishing “validation” as a key dimension for artists, where value is given to individuals for the act of creating as well as for their work. In this study, value is not just tied to financial resources or expectations, but also to recognition from peers, publics, critics, and training or presenting institutions. Legitimacy, and value, come from the reflexive exchange with these groups. A highlighted observation that “Artists’ societal contributions are not well understood, documented, or publicized” is a critical note that informs this thesis (Jackson 9). By focusing attention on language and specifically, performativity as a tool or lens to be employed in communicating about artists and their work, the field can better articulate the worth of arts and culture. By utilizing, clear, inventive and specific language that reflect different types of values and contexts, the arts can reassert benefits

and resonance for communities and constituents that can ascribe value to the arts beyond economic impact.

5. The Problematics of Support

This complicated and conflicted expression of arts support is also seen within the disciplines of the performing arts: dance, music, oratory, theater, other live practices, and various hybrids. To make their art or to perform their work, performing artists and performance-based institutions compete in a larger marketplace against entertainment, sports, and other competitors for consumer time and attention. Although there is an expressed value that is measurable in public opinion, again, the value established by governmental support has measurably diminished since 1992. The steep competition for engagement, patrons, audiences, and impressions results in many obstacles to even moderate success, much less long term sustainability or growth. At a high level, the newer financial model is simple: revenue from donations and ticket sales or access cyclically return to artistic production and artistic or institutional sustainment. Fundraising and income from tickets from one exhibition, installation, season, or show often make the next possible, so strategies and practices developed to mitigate the changed funding landscape. The need for earned revenue increased, as did dependence on philanthropic donations, and more localized governmental support, when it was available on a city or state level. Some artists, practices, and institutions successfully navigated the changed financial realities, but systemically, little was done to counteract the drop in the perceived value since the early 1990s. Jeff Chang, in discussing the after effects of the Culture Wars states that “The battle over the NEA effectively destroyed the argument for public culture,” and the performing arts suffered with the rest of the nonprofit cultural sector (114).

With the devaluing of public culture and resulting changes to artistic financial prospects, the increased reliance on donations from individuals and philanthropic organizations came with their own complications and pitfalls. Commitments from donors can result in increased obligations and responsibilities, ranging from (but certainly not limited to) increased access to artists and staff to mandated, detailed reporting on specific results that the donation produced. This accounting of impact or a detailing on a return on the investment often requires significant work by the artist or institution, as the impact serves to justify the use of the donated capital to the arts. The rationale of having reached a certain number of constituents, or generated a certain number of media impressions, or inspired positive critical notices helps bolster the initial investment. This demand for reporting back on results and justification that financial resources were not only employed wisely but with positive outcomes and results creates yet another economy for the artist or organization to successfully navigate. While there are many strategies that can help minimize or mitigate these demands and increased workload, they fail to address the larger issue of the perceived devaluation of culture within American society.

As a grantmaker at a mid-size corporate philanthropy program, I see the consequences of the strategies of impact reporting while working with artists and arts institutions to facilitate financial donations to support artistic projects. Almost all of these conversations start with the language of capitalism, market economies, and institutional development terms that present a logical case for investment by demonstrating a quantifiable impact from the artistic project. Presented with project budgets that demonstrate how effectively investment is spent, and the target number of marketing impressions that are expected as a goal for the project, these conversations often begin with numbers as opposed to ideas and art. Although this practice may be useful in securing funding, as it allows for measurable results to be shared with the funder's

stakeholders, something is missing from these conversations. All too often, the manifestation of the mission and intent of the artistic work are obscured or omitted when the result of art is defined only by quantitative measurements. In conversations where the artistic project has a performance component, what happens, what happened, or what will happen during that performed experience is rarely communicated or evoked. On the occasions when the performance is discussed, it is usually expressed with a perfunctory, metrics driven evaluative description that fails transmit the experience that is designed for the audience. There are lots of numbers and percentages intended to demonstrate the effectiveness of past programming along with critical reviews to illustrate past successes, but little that explains or transports the target funder into an experiential realm of the artistic intention. While these measures might meet all the necessary requirements for a philanthropic impact assessment, there is little that demonstrates the exchange that happens in performance, much less something that explores the granular, human transformation that can occur in “socially committed, aesthetically stirred spectatorship” (Dolan 15).

In one memorable grant meeting, this communication gap was particularly acute. A tri-state area theater company with a rich, layered history and a distinct cultural mission to represent a marginalized community came into discuss the possibility to apply for funding. Fresh off the success of a critically-hailed season with strong audience attendance, the bleak financial reality of the company was a shocking contrast to their representation of successful resonance within their community. Across the conference table, the Executive Director skillfully cited audience statistics, described critical and audience reviews of recent shows, and outlined potential tours and partnership goals. This information failed to convey either a sense of urgency or compelling rationale for a grant. Uncomfortable, I shifted in my chair throughout the meeting, listening hard,

trying to find a way into their messaging. My ankles and legs, hidden beneath the conference table, twisted and interlocked as I focused my attention, and I took a sip of water every time I wanted something more but did not know what I should ask. I was fully hydrated by the end of this meeting. What is more, the deep history of this theater company and the quality of their work and goals remained uncommunicated. The numbers and quantitative details they shared failed to present any of the quality of the artistic work at the center of their pitch. The data alone was not compelling, as there was no extended context or understanding transmitted to know what it might be like to be a member of their audience. I knew that their work was attracting audiences, but I had no sense of what they might see, feel, hear, or how they might be transformed. Numbers, marketing materials, and reviews pushed across the table in a brightly colored folder for later reading read later did not transmit the onstage performances and their effect, which is at the center of their mission. Rationales behind programming themes and explanations of show selection remained unexplained by the Executive Director, who, as the leader of the company, should have been in a strong position to contextualize these choices. Insight into the artists and conversations that the institution was fostering, design decisions, the methods of fulfilling their objectives, and the mechanisms that generate experiences for their constituents went unmentioned. Instead, my colleague and I were told production titles and plot summaries and left to flip through the assembled materials. Treated like potential investors instead of partners invited to share the journey of their audiences, we were handed a prospectus and listened to a pitch as to why we should invest, and were left to build our own ideas about the audience experience, much less the transformative effect the work might generate. Statistics and play titles do not transmit the experience that can occur in a live performance. I wanted to know what it might be like to sit in a seat and watch a show, the qualities of the experience of being a

ticketholder, to know what it feels like to be a part of the community affected by their work. I knew from the numbers that it was a compelling experience for many, and the legacy of the company indicated a long history of drawing audiences. However, none of the experiential qualities were communicated in our offices that day. What I missed in our exchange was language that could place me in the same space as the audience, or create an embodied understanding of the result of their curatorial choices.

Unfortunately, while I stood in this gap of understanding, the important decision of whether or not to financially support a historic theater company had to be made. Amidst budgetary pressures and limited resources, not every organization who applies can receive a grant. In this case, the decision was difficult, as I could only infer and assume what happened during performances at that theater, and try to imagine how audiences were affected. I tried to envision the results of outreach programs, as well as picture what was described in reviews from the local press. Ultimately, an instinctive understanding of the need for the organization within its community and a respect its mission and cultural legacy drove the final grant award. Their need had been clearly demonstrated, even if a compelling artistic presentation was missing. Despite a happy ending for a struggling nonprofit theater company, the encounter left me with a feeling of a missed opportunity. Instead of a successful communication of the essence, necessity, and qualitative value of the performances, it was a hollow experience of hearing statistical analysis of impact. I did not know what the company accomplished for audiences. I knew their work was popular, but I was unable to imagine the experience of seeing a performance. The award was given because the need for it was clear, not because of an understanding of the performances the award would sustain for future audiences. The gap between the artistic mission to its realization in performance remained beyond my understanding, regardless of the facts and

figures that had been shared throughout our meeting.

Later, after the award was official, this disconnect reappeared. I struggled to create a framework that would justify financial support for the theater company at this point in their organizational existence. Although I remained convinced of the intrinsic worth of the company, the need for the work within the community and that the money would be well spent, I struggled to articulate why the organization's work merited financial support in this exact moment in time. Lacking an argument that included the curatorial rationales behind their projects and programming, I had to fill this gap with an alternative justification. Ultimately, I settled for a narrative based on the organization's historical presence and record of production instead of a specific or production choice. It was an adequate argument, but there was still a missed opportunity in what had transpired at that conference table. This respected company had failed to share their work in a compelling and persuasive manner. I longed for a performativity in the conversation and materials that would construct the identity of the organization or detail the aims of their onstage and outreach work. Despite thorough preparation and diligence, merely supplying statistics to this philanthropic conversation left a void. Despite his comprehensive preparations and intentions, the Executive Director failed to illuminate their approach to artistry and presenting. Ultimately, the organization got the money they needed, but I was dissatisfied. Technically, we had each executed our proscribed roles in the exchange, but as I reflected on the engagement, I wondered if my frustration indicated an opportunity. There had to be a way to communicate beyond just a funding conversation and while reinforcing artistic principles, missions, and values to multiple audiences.

6. Holistic Evaluation: Opportunity for Performativity

The idea that speech is an action in and of itself is not an original concept. Current thoughts about performativity, whether in aspects of identity or even economics, can be traced J. L. Austin's explorations of speech-act theory. Stemming from a series of lectures Austin made at Harvard in 1955, the transcripts of these collected speeches produced the basis of a theory which continues to spur exploration into the effects of speech, and were published in a volume aptly titled *How to do Things with Words*. His idea of "performative utterances" — statements that become actions when spoken — initiated a field of thought that investigated the power of linguistic practices to define states of being and social norms (Austin 6). The idea that language itself is a performance that stands in and of itself shifted dialogues about the ramifications of speaking. As many have noted, however, Austin's theory is focused largely on exceptions and aberrations to these rules; the abnormalities and miscommunications that can result. A speaker's intention is an illocutionary act, while the receiver has a perlocutionary result. Accordingly — and perhaps obviously to a theater practitioner — what a locutor states is not what always results. Shannon Jackson succinctly states that in Austin's work, "Performatives did many things, but not always what the speaker intended," (182). My encounter with the Executive Director is an example of the illocutionary intentions of a conversation failing to align with the perlocutionary effects, as there was a disconnect between what they were trying to effect with their quantitative display, which resulted in an unsuccessful communication. When an ephemeral artistic experience is the center of a conversation, the exchange can create a fertile opportunity for a carefully considered response. When brilliantly conceived and executed, filling the vacuum

when discussing performance has great power in many relationships, including those between the artist/institution/advocate and the funder/patron/target.

As a receiver to many funding propositions, recognizing the power of performativity in these situations is difficult to articulate, especially when the word itself confuses. At this moment, Jackson comes to the rescue on page 2 of *Professing Performance*, offering the following definition. "...Linguistic acts don't simply reflect a world, but speech actually has the power to *make* a world." When recalling meetings in my theater practice and my role as grantmaker, I recognize that speaking about a show or experience creates a new performance at the conference table. When effectively employed in a funding conversation, this construction then argues and exhorts for financial support to live again. When this speech act is successful, it is glorious, and when it is infelicitous and fails, it is disappointing and painful for both the locator and receiver. The power of the language act to drive results is also an essential and underutilized tool in the performing artist's toolbox. Instinctively, some elements of performativity may appear in compelling arguments by practiced advocates, but in highlighting the larger power of performativity in these types of conversations and representations of and around performance, perhaps the sector at large can utilize this power.

The power of performativity is not exclusive to discussions of the performing arts. To the contrary, the phenomenon has been explored in other fields to great success. Famously, Judith Butler asserted that something as prevalent as gender roles are a performance, stating in a 1988 essay, as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts," ("*Performative Acts*" 519). Can the artistic identity be similarly reinforced by a repetition of defining acts, including speech acts? I suggest that whether it is an individual artist or a representative artistic organization, that which arguably applies to gender can apply to theater and performance art. In re-performing

aspects of a performance or artistic identity, it is reinforced and is experienced a second time. In her 1997 work *Excitable Speech*, Butler cites an excerpt from Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel acceptance speech describing a parable where, "language [is] ...a system, partly...[a] living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences..." Morrison neatly positions speaking as itself an act, with the words and communication that follow as a secondary act (qtd. in Butler 6). The idea that the act of speaking asserts an agency or power means that the speaker therefore holds the power over the execution of said communication. For a locutor, what becomes possible when language shifts from quantitative measurements and reconfiguring the illocutionary act into an artistic evocation? As the system of communication changes, the dynamic will also recalibrate between the locator and receiver, allowing for the transmission of something that might otherwise remain ineffable. An opportunity arises for something outside the conversation to be transmitted within it.

When considering performance companies for grant awards, as a receiver, I try to understand their programming strategy, the experiences of their audiences and the broader consequences of community exchanges. In the instance recounted earlier, these inquiries were met solely with metrics. We were told how many bodies were in seats at performances, average ticket prices and income, and handed a list of pull quotes. The effect of sitting in those seats, watching a play and engaging with the programming remained unknown. Instead of discussing quantitative measures, I wanted a compelling description and understanding of their curated artistic vision. In this case, a missed opportunity to transmit the elusive effects of an artistic experience to fill this gap identified the platform for a secondary performance. The performativity of this secondary exchange can be used to effectively communicate transmission of an understanding of a live artistic experience. In the earlier example, descriptions of

experiential qualities evoked in their onstage season could have revealed aspects of their onstage work beyond just play titles and subjects. This exchange requires clarity, specificity, and qualitative descriptions that re-invoke aspects of the artistic work while communicating artistic approaches and rationales.

Beyond any single meeting, however, the difficulties that can arise around discussions of performance can be reconceived as a secondary performance. Whether it occurs in arguing, advocating, discussing, or engaging around an ephemeral art work, the gap that comes from being outside the time of the experience can be addressed with an action that is itself a performance.

The discussion or writing about the performativity of performance conversation is often tangled; threads and thoughts become discursive and disappear. Judith Butler brilliantly expresses the following in *Excitable Speech*: “We do things with language, we produce effects *with* language...and we do things *to* language, but *language itself is also a thing that we do*. Language is a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences” (16). I employ italics in this quote to emphasize the idea that language itself is an act. Is it any wonder, then, that the act of speaking about an experience, of translating an ephemeral, time-based event that happened in the past with complicated layers of creative intent and results is inherently difficult to transmit in a secondary exchange? Discussing the performing arts becomes a place where an analysis can take place. The Executive Director from my earlier example assumed that the experiential was outside of the expectation of the funding conversation, but I argue that not only could they have used it to facilitate an in-depth exchange, but that the experiential *must* be communicated in these conversations. Frequently, these funding conversations will include

visual, aural, or other sensory aides to flesh out some aspect of the show, but even with these assists, the re-telling is a separate act, another distinct performance. Videos of past performances or of artist practices, audio recording of musical performances, or bodily gestures that evoke those seen onstage often appear at that conference table. Furthermore, “a speech act can be an act without necessarily being an efficacious act” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 16) and accordingly, I have had many conversations about the performing arts that have been just that; frustrating, unfulfilling attempts to understand an event which has already taken place — or has yet to occur. The ability to make a compelling argument often resides in the performance of these presentations, where the language used is able to evoke elements of the artistic experience that the audience received or will receive. Although this is a useful tool for funding and advocacy in the performing arts at large, it is reasonable to think that increased awareness about the power of performativity in performance discourse could be useful in discussing the art on almost any level, including criticism and preservation. The additional textures and dimensions used to communicate about the performing arts helps to encounter an event that is outside of this moment either again, or before it exists. This transmission of the ephemeral deserves careful consideration.

What does an artist or institution need to consider when speaking about ephemeral experience to effectively transmit a qualitative essence outside of the original performance? The acknowledgement of the perlocutionary effects of these conversations and a cognizant examination by the participants who discuss, define and advocate for artistic experiences can help. A deep reflection of the intended recipient for the language and their relationship to the artist or institution is essential, but the investigation must go deeper. How might one performatively evoke the experience itself, only using language? Beyond conversations with an

artist to a funder or presenter, these discussions will continue to take place outside the recognition of the initial performance. In the most successful scenarios, this is probably a desirable outcome. For example, for the sake of marketing campaigns that rely on word of mouth or promotional strategies, a line of recommending promoters and ambassadors are the best advocates. Butler says, “the time of discourse is not always the time of the subject,” (*Excitable Speech* 31) and the power of performativity in these conversations might have exponential effect, as the conversations continue to occur after of the initial instigative circumstance.

Specific language used to situate a performance within the context of its creation, execution and reception should move beyond marketing or development conversations. Evoking the experience of performance is challenging, but reduction to statistics strips the transmission of the transformative that defines the nature of an experienced event. By attending to the criteria by which we talk about the arts and specifically about performance, discourse should include qualitative evaluations and descriptions. Success will not be predicated solely by ticket sales, critical reviews, or efficacy of outreach (or other measures that might be identified by impact philanthropy) but against the curatorial intention. In the meeting I recounted earlier, I would be given an idea of what attending a show was like, and how their programming addressed specific concerns or themes endemic to their particular community. I would have had the opportunity to see their approach to outreach, understand their intention and the quality of their designed intervention, and could discuss elements of what resonated or worked, and perhaps what did not. Ultimately, the discourse would re-perform some element of the original theatrical experience. For example, “We are presenting/presented show X in the hopes that it will inspire hope, joy, reflection or fear or generate a specific, Y experience for our community.” Then, even if I never see the show, there is a potential to understand part of the desired experiential outcome. Specific

communication around the artistic experience is at the heart of this discourse. Established metrics can, and arguably should, remain a part of this conversation, but empowering theater as a discipline to advocate for itself in new and innovative ways can only improve the given circumstances on both sides of these conversations. This could drive change beyond just the theater and to the performing arts at large for both funders and artists, where the economies of time, labor, and experience rarely create objects that can be traded in a market after the performance event concludes. In a grantmaking reality, where the distribution of funds is already “demonstrably out of balance with our evolving cultural landscape” (Sidford 1), assessing new methods for discussing and evaluating arts and culture, including performance, is needed more than ever.

7. Public Works and New Georges: Performative Analysis

This thesis focuses on two New York City non-profit theater companies, The Public Theater and New Georges, who effectively use the performativity of language to transmit some part of the experience of their work into descriptive vocabularies, enacting a secondary performance. I have chosen two New York City organizations, The Public Theater and New Georges as case studies due to the clarity and efficacy of their communications. From marketing materials to direct spoken engagement, the linguistic choices used to talk about their work results in a re-performance or evocation of the curatorial heart or ethos of their artistic projects. The Public Theater is a large, well known institution with varied and respective programming and a thirty-million-dollar budget. Since 2012, their community-focused program known as Public Works has strategically reached thousands of New Yorkers in diverse local communities. The

qualitative successes of this program have been closely documented, allowing for rich sources of material. For New Georges, a significantly smaller theater company that is focused exclusively on supporting and promoting the work of women playwrights, the language used for their mission and programs is consistently vivid and vibrant. The curatorial strategy is infused into the discourse around their work and in their institution, revealing the enthusiasm of their community whose zeal and need for the organization is palpable. In both instances, those touched by the work become passionate and enthusiastic champions of the organization and programs, generating a rich cycle of ambassadors who go out and continue lifecycle of the curatorial intention of the program, which contrasts with the struggles of the historic theater company discussed earlier. These company champions carry messages and purpose into their local and personal relationships, promoting and expanding the influence of the organization more effectively than a marketing campaign. In looking at the curatorial strategies for Public Works and New Georges and the language used to perform them, lessons can be extrapolated and shared to benefit other artists and institutions. The vocabularies and strategies used to highlight the importance and successes of these programs help illuminate the ineffable center of the work. Hopefully, these observations to follow will provide inspiration and useful guidance to other artists and institutions who wish to expand the conversations around their work.

Within these two case studies, I use performativity as a theoretical and methodological lens to analyze the communications from Public Works and New Georges. Using printed and published materials, and in the case of Public Works, a robust documentation of anthropological documentation from the first three years of the project, I parse the programmatic and curatorial themes constituted within. Chapter 2 focuses on Public Works, Chapter 3 on New Georges, and a synthesis and conclusion finish out this thesis.

Defining key terms is crucial to fully unpack and discuss the case studies that follow. Value, resonance, practice, impact, curation, culture, art, and performance hold several meanings, all dependent usage and context. From this point forward, I will refer to the artistic performance that takes place within a theater as the “experience” or “show” in order to fully explore the language around the artistic work with delimited parameters. An “artistic experience” is one that is created or curated by artists and experienced by an audience. I expand “speech” to include communication in a larger sense, so that written or displayed materials can also be considered and evaluated. “Value” indicates the worth or importance placed on something by an outside evaluator; if this is meant in a context of a specific market economy, that will be indicated. “Resonance” is used to discuss or indicate the power of an experience, artist, or institution to continue to have an effect after an action; the ability for some sort of effect to continue after an action is completed. “Practice” is used as a noun, not a verb. It does not indicate training, but rather describes a repeated system, and will typically be artistic in nature. “Curating” refers to structuring, assembling, or programming. This can be used in the context of presenting work or of the employment of a deliberate arrangement or employment of techniques or strategies. “Culture” and “art” are often used interchangeably, but for the purposes herein, art is a noun, used to reference the result of creative design, or the application of skills, resulting in the experience constructed for an audience. Culture will refer to the customs, social forms, and material traits shared by a group or groups. The “Performing Arts” include disciplines of theater, music, dance, and the lovely interdisciplinary offspring and inventions of everything in-between. Ideally, clarity around this language will enable productive exploration and elucidation of patterns and techniques in these performative theatrical conversations.

I examine the following case studies and identify the relationship of the speaker and the recipient to the performance as well as the goal of the illocutionary act. The center of this conversation remains an ephemeral, unique performance, so the speech act that attempts to create a specific outcome should effect a similar quality. The difficulty comes when, “Language remains alive when it refuses to ‘encapsulate’ or ‘capture’ the events and lives it describes. But when it seeks to effect that capture, language not only loses its vitality, but acquires its own violent force” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 9). Although Butler uses this to explore hate speech and its effects, she argues that hate speech is actually a performance. To put it in other terms, the more one tries to delimit a unique experience within the limitations of language the more one will fail. The possibility comes not from defining, outlining, or describing that experience, but from deft language that gives life again within this second performance. Public Works and New Georges communicate about their programs and impact without reducing transmittal to quantitative analysis, and examining these projects with a performative lens reveals a powerful linguistic expression and technique that can be applied across the discipline.

The Public Theater and Public Works

1. Background: Both the Whole and Sum of Parts

When an institution successfully uses language to evoke an artistic experience after the ephemeral performance moment, the effects can be powerful and far-reaching. The employment of performativity as successful identity-building language has a long history at The Public Theater, with roots that stretch back to the earliest performances and artistic experiences. Not only does the current name of the Theater reflect its target audience and constituency, but The Public Theater, since its first days as The New York Shakespeare Festival, has branded itself as a public good in New York City. This chapter draws on two forms of analysis. In the first part, I frame the Public's development of its mission as a performative act — one that has been rendered “public” by the organization's naming and labeling of key programs. In the second half of this chapter, I apply this history to a close reading of the Public Works documentation and assessment efforts. I argue that these assessments highlight performative elements without naming them as such.

The expression of institutional identity might begin to theatergoers or even passersby (or in Austinian terms, receivers) with the name, The Public, but this expression extends to almost all programs within the organization. The following examples demonstrate an organizational commitment to project names that evocatively and efficiently reflect both their purpose and link to their mission. In this case, the institution of The Public might be thought of as a body while its programs are the limbs or functional systems that help the entire organism fulfill its mission. Project monikers consistently reflect the ethos, intent, and method of community intersection as

parts of the larger Public whole. There is numerous exemplary community engagement across the institution, but one of the earliest non-mainstage outreach programs was the Mobile Unit. Originally founded in 1957, this program was revived in 2010 and is a transportable production team that travels the city, performing for audiences who might never see shows at the Theater's traditional venues (Murphy and Landis 2). Shakespeare in the Park, aptly if blandly labeled, continues the decades-long tradition of free, star-studded Shakespearean and classic plays performed in New York City's Central Park. A newer addition to the Public's programming is Under the Radar, a festival that showcases and highlights domestic and international emerging work for artists whose vital work might otherwise remain unproduced in New York City. One last example is Joe's Pub, a bar and cabaret venue within the home building that showcases music and other variety acts. These limbs or systems (with others) make up the larger whole of The Public, serving different parts of the greater New York City community. Public Works, the centerpiece of this case study, is a newer addition to this lineage of programs that effectively and efficiently communicate at The Public. In what follows, I identify the relationship of the program as the speaker and the beholder of the materials as the receiver and examine the secondary performance in the language and presentations therein.

2. The Body: Performativity at the Institution

The Public Theater is recognized across the United States as an incubator of new play development as well as venerable producer of classic plays; however, its founding as the New York Shakespeare Festival were anything but impressive. Scrappy and humble, the company had its first performances in a church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, scrounging for resources

and staffing. Beginning with an initial charge to create great theater for the masses through their annual summertime productions in Central Park, the company developed new initiatives and began fostering new plays. Over the decades and through Joe Papp's foundational leadership, a small and imaginatively resourceful group developed into a recognized and formative New York City civic and cultural institution. Papp was a one-time sheet metal worker and former floor manager for CBS television with left-leaning politics, with a passion for Shakespeare (Epstein 72–76). Papp's long-standing commitment to public access to classical theater continues to this day as a crucial part of The Public's mission, and albeit supplemented with robust incubation of new performance. The organization has generated some of the most successful Broadway shows in the late part of the twentieth century: *A Chorus Line* (1975), *Hair* (1977), *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* (1996), to name a paltry few, and the most recent record-breaking phenomenon, *Hamilton* (2015) took home eleven Tony Awards (Playbill). Now named The Public Theater and often referred to as just "The Public" the one-time upstart is a legendary American theater institution.

From his very first production of *Romeo and Juliet* in that run-down church on the Lower East Side, Papp aimed to make Shakespeare accessible to New Yorkers from every borough and demographic (Epstein 87). Born and raised in poverty in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Papp identified with the underserved populations across the city, and set a mandate with the company to bring theater to everyone. "[Culture] had to always be doing something for the masses, for ordinary people, not just servicing an elite. When I got into doing Shakespeare, the whole idea was to give it to people in the parks so there would be large numbers there who would be influenced" (Papp and Turan 22). Through a combination of resourcefulness, tenacious effort, resilience, and luck, early programming proved to be popular and expanded from the summer

Shakespeare in the Park performances to add that Mobile Unit in 1957, bringing classic plays to all five boroughs. After a brief, somewhat disastrous four-year tenure at Lincoln Center from 1973 to 1977, the search for a permanent home for the organization resumed in earnest (Epstein 344). Dreaming of a municipal theater space that could be a year-round home to the ambitious festival and a laboratory space to develop and perform new plays, Papp ambitiously pursued real estate for a physical plant for the company. In 1965, he initiated an extended exchange of letters with Mayor Robert Wagner, who ran New York City from 1954 to 1965². In this correspondence, Papp boldly requested, "...a major grant of four million dollars to cover the construction and operation of a 1,200 seat Public theater" (186-187). Amidst this frank, ambitious request, the use of the word "Public" as a capitalized adjective is a critical note, as its use claimed an identity for the theater company in New York City. Papp's naming description reinforced that the company and building would serve as a resource for people of the city. The initial plan for "A Public Theater in New York City" was designed to be accessible to residents. The budget and plan that Papp sent to Mayor Wagner in a subsequent letter laid out the following, even more demanding criteria:

A Public Theater in New York City[...]must accommodate 1,600 to 1,800 people; It must be priced at levels which allow the non-theater going public to attend[...]accessible to public transportation;[...]be organically linked to the educational apparatus of the City[...]It must be a pacesetter, and it must reflect in every area of its operation the multi-racial composition of the City. (Epstein 187)

Papp's focus on creating a theater for underserved communities was notable, again, conceiving of culture as a resource that should be accessible to everyone. His considerations of race and class reflected his own understanding of accessibility for marginalized populations

² ("Former Mayor")

within the city. New York City's government in 1965 (and indeed, government at all levels in the United States) were much more supportive of the arts at large and theater in particular. Papp believed theater should stand upon "the bedrock of civic responsibility" (Papp qtd. in Epstein 187). Although the organization was still called the New York Shakespeare Festival, and in fact remains incorporated as such with the Internal Revenue Service to the present day, the former Astor Library building itself became known as The Public (Exempt Organizations Select Check). "The Public Theater will remain the crucible of new work, new writers, new actors, new directors, new theater administrators and technicians" (Papp qtd. in Turan and Papp 323). In describing the future for the institution, Papp laid out a map and then proceeded to build it. Even the beautiful former library structure now known as The Public's home building underwent a mirroring transformation, transitioning from an abandoned, underused structure to a carefully preserved, landmarked, bustling, multi-stage edifice bursting with audiences, staff, and with reception spaces open to casual visitors and passerby.

The establishment of The Public Theater was not an immediate or easy success, and as the company tried to find a sustainable path while expanding into year-round programming, confusion over naming and identity continued. Multiple names and labels for the organization would last beyond Papp's tenure; a quick search for The Public on Playbill.com reveals a plethora of names in the Broadway database alone. Lacking a cohesive identity, problems with naming prohibited a clear attribution of successes. For example, when discussing the successful theater that produced the legendary Broadway production of *A Chorus Line*, who are you referencing? The Public? The Festival? Are you referencing Shakespeare in the Park but you mean the whole organization? As The Public's Broadway transfers provide the larger institution with income that supports the entire organization, knowing and naming the producing entity

engineering the mechanics between commercial and non-profit theatrical engagement is important. The Public would struggle to financially support programs like the Mobile Unit and Public Works if commercial transfers did not bring in sustaining income. Without a clearly named identity and unclear linkages among programs, misunderstandings occur about which name and body actually commanded and directed all of these parts.

The second successor to lead The Public after Papp's death, George C. Wolfe, understood the power of language to shape and focus institutional practices and perception. Wolfe prioritized defining and clarifying the institutional identity at The Public for multiple constituencies, knowing that clarity could guide staff, audiences, board members, and external observers in understanding and achieving institutional aims. From a performative perspective, the construction and alignment of a clear identity would also reify the diverse audiences that Wolfe hoped to reach. Wolfe was a black, openly gay writer and director and was best known at the time for *The Colored Museum*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, and directing *Angels in America* (McNeil). He incorporated the activism of his artistic practice into his leadership of The Public, bringing in pluralism as he sought to build a new version of The Public Theater (Pogrebin). In 1994, Wolfe engaged Paula Scher to design the visual identity for the institution, in order to bring all of the various programs and branding into a recognizable, iconic, evocative naming. The story behind this identity is told on *Abstract*, a design-focused documentary series. "One of the things at the time that was challenging about the public theater it had these multiple identities: The Public Theater, the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Shakespeare in Central Park" Wolfe recalls ("Paula Scher"). Scher, who is one of the most well-known successful graphic designers and a legend within the specialty of typography, designed a logo for the company that took the name of the building, The Public, while simultaneously iterating the mission of the company. "They had a

name issue,” Scher recalls, remembering the challenge of the commission:

I wanted everything to feel like it was of one, that it was breathing fully as an institution...It had to be populous, New York-ish – meaning it had to be loud and proud...I realized I could make the word “Public” in the same kind of [range of typographic] weights and it would symbolize all of New York. Every type of weight was included. You can create an identity for a whole place by a recognizability of type.”

The idea that the visual identity for The Public would coalesce and cover all the various programs and venues and secure an institutional recognition demonstrates the power of language and how it is heard, read, or encountered. Scher waxes rhapsodic about the power of logotype, stating, “Before you even read it, you have a sensibility and spirit, and if you combine that with a meaning, then that’s spectacular.” The effect and power of design choice signifies meaning to those who read or perceive it, and the perception and understanding is a performance of the identity, in this case, of the theater company and represents the performance programming at the heart of the institutional mission. There is a “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” and this power is arguably not limited to spoken discourse (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* xii). What Scher created with the Public Theater logo and subsequent branding, effected a visual communication about the onstage experience, reiterating it to those who encountered the name and visual brand. In discussing the power of Scher’s design for *Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk*, Michael Bierut, Scher’s partner at the agency Pentagram, describes the effect of her design as follows: “It really signaled a paradigm shift, a new moment for The Public Theater. What Paula did was she figured a way...how to take what she saw onstage and turned [it] into ink on paper. The type in those posters, from top to bottom, filled with words. It’s crazy, it’s in your face, it’s just like New York. It became the standard”

(“Paula Scher”). To be clear, for The Public, identity is more than just a visual brand for a product. The design transmits an experience through a visual medium from the institution to a recipient. More than just a representational image or title, an essence of the onstage performance is indicated, communicated, and performed so that when one reads the layout, the designer’s understanding of the onstage experience is evoked in a direct way. The Public Works limb of The Public constructs a powerful identity with imaginative language.

3. Public Works: More than a Municipal Utility

If The Public is an organic body, Public Works might be imagined as an arm, running from the shoulder to a hand, connecting the central body and literally reaching outward. Public Works, conceived in 2010 and launched in 2012, is a major initiative of The Public Theater whose mission “seeks to engage the people of New York by making them creators and not just spectators. Working deeply with partner organizations in all five boroughs, Public Works invites members of diverse communities to participate in workshops, take classes, attend performances at The Public, and, most importantly, to join in the creation of ambitious works of participatory theater” (Public Theater). The project began as an idea gestated between Shirley Brice Heath, at the time a Professor-at-Large at Brown University, and Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of The Public, in 2010. According to the background in the complete three-year report on Public Works, Brice Heath and Eustis, after years of collaboration at several institutions, including a partnership between Brown University and Trinity Repertory Theater, had a strong shared interest in the concept of participatory arts (8). They shaped the original philosophy of the program around their idea that prolonged exposure and involvement in artistic practices can drive long and lasting

changes for the people who participate in these practices. These ideas were refined and developed and officially named Public Works when Lear deBessonnet joined The Public in 2012. In theatrical circles, deBessonnet was already known for her innovative approaches to musicals and deep commitment to social concerns, having developed a successful directing practice that fused her activism into fulfilling, critically acclaimed theater. Referencing the fruits of her labors as “hard-won joy” deBessonnet’s approach was honed in large-scale projects in different cities. For example, her decision to collaborate with a Christian punk band in a 2009 Philadelphia production of *Man of La Mancha* used cast members drawn from the local transient community to great effect. Working on this production also taught deBessonnet how to creatively solve for logistical issues that might develop from working with non-professional artistic partners. When deBessonnet began building the framework for Public Works informed by a philosophy on how humanity at large and theater artists in particular “model right action and envision a better reality,” she was singularly equipped to capitalize on what other artists might see as challenges or obstacles and use them within the creative process and empower ambitious projects. (Shaw 3-5). At The Public, with her associate Sarah Grosman, deBessonnet looked to partner with community organizations across all five boroughs to initiate the program, designing a framework that would bring participants into Public Works through these partners and preparing them for ways to work within the theater. Beginning with self-selected courses taught through the partner organizations, including the Brownsville Recreation Center in Brooklyn, The Children’s Aid Society in Manhattan, the Domestic Workers United in Staten Island, DreamYard in the Bronx, and the Fortune Society in Queens, the project culminated in a full performance with a 100+ person cast, joined by a few professional actors and other selected arts companies from New York City. The individuals who joined Public Works through these organizations ranged from

young children to the elderly, and represented a vast array of professions and economic strata (Brice Heath, Shirley, et al 5 – 6). In an attempt to glean in-depth learnings from the process to share with other organizations and offer Public Works as a model for other programs, Brice Heath, and two other researchers, Tiana Bakić Hayden and Siv Lie, were situated within the program for three years. In documenting the process, how it changed, and the impact it had on participants and organizations, the researchers produced a repository of language. Importantly for this thesis, when analyzed through a lens of performativity, the collected language used throughout all aspects of the program, reveals a performance of language while recording the effects of those words. The documentation is precise and provides a wealth of material for examination; this thesis can only engage with selections of their research.

Examining the “Public Works” moniker reveals several fertile layers for interpretation. When read or uttered, or heard, the purpose of the program is produced, positioning the project for the constituencies it serves and represents. The name depicts that programmatic function as a working, intervening part of the larger body of The Public. This evocative definition, implementing effects, as Butler would say, offers three initial facets to the project (*Excitable Speech* 159). The first is a company like a municipal utility company, such as a waterworks or electric supplier, supplying a critical need for modern life within a city. The second reaction was one of affirmation, as in *The Public accomplishes*, and then a third thought invoked service. In short order, then, three simultaneous definitions constructed an understanding of the program’s goal and function. One interpretation for the name “Public Works” is a collective functioning or doing. This definition also leaves room for “Works” to be interpreted as a noun owned by a specific Public — either the hosting institution of The Public Theater or the larger sense of the New York City population. If you read that noun “Works” as a verb, you then have the action of

laboring, doing, or serving, for that unique “Public.” When interpreted within the context of the institution, Public Works inclusively incorporates myriad meanings into the name alone, creating a fertile discourse for possibility in the name of the program. If the name is only a starting point, generative ideas are launched at its utterance, and the scope and impact of actual engagement and experience are sketched in the imagination of the receiver.

From this initial point of entry, it quickly becomes apparent that The Public’s institutional perspective on successes within Public Works has been thoughtfully and carefully considered and executed. In their documentation of the language used throughout the program both by its leaders and participants, Brice and Lie articulate their initial commission from The Public. They restate the institutional desire for documentation that would reveal the process and outcomes for everyone involved, instead of predicted or prompted responses. The purpose of Public Works as a participatory arts intervention for all of New York City and how it would differ from other public theater programs is defined by the following quote from the collected anthropological research:

The Public Theater holds an entirely different view from expectations generally associated with evaluation. The artistic director and staff believe learning travels on a two-way street. When The Public created Public Works, everyone had something to learn. Here *everyone* means: artists and all staff members, funders and supporters of The Public; community partner organizations, ensemble members, and audiences taking part in Public Works. (Brice Heath, Shirley, et al Part 5, page 2)

The necessity of clarifying evaluative expectations acknowledges that the intention of the program subverts the typical quantitative paradigm for measuring successes. Here, success (and all of the stakeholders involved expect successes) appears in dynamic situations where change occurs along several axes simultaneously. The idea that transmission and learning will be an

exchange as opposed to a one-way transaction is a key element to the Public Works mission and communication style. To return to Austinian language, every stakeholder is a possible locutor and receiver.

Although Brice Heath and Lie document a common pattern of measurements that are typically only taken for certain participants in a process (usually the target population for whom “change” is aimed at, transmitted to, or designed for) The Public stated an intention to document the actuality for all of those touched by the process. Several documents provide ample material for analysis of language, but in what follows, I look at a booklet printed by The Public from the first year of the program that documents their first foray into Public Works programming.

Performatively parsing a published booklet that details the first year of Public Works reveals linguistic construction on every page. Flipping through it is fun and visually stimulating; there are colorful photographs of happy, diverse, active crowds and interesting infographics. It is not too long, as you can page through the full-color matte-print brochure in just a few moments. Its depiction of the first year of Public Works includes images from the culminating performance at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, (well known as the stage for Shakespeare in the Park) and features quotations and a snapshot of a positive critical review from the New York Times. With a black cover and diagonal white text that shouts “Public Works” on the outer cover, the brochure unfolds to reveal a tri-fold back cover that states in a bolded, magenta, sans-serif Public Theater identifiable font set in all caps that “THIS IS OUR PROPOSAL TO HUMANITY.” Before opening to read further, the recipient knows that the contents are meant to represent a collective’s intentions, opinions, and program for change — what’s more, the collective is pictured in individual portraits that line that inside cover. Performatively, though, the language enclosed proposes an intervention and methodically details and executes that change. A smaller,

infinitesimally brighter pink booklet is enclosed within that larger cover, and it is there we find the rationale at the heart of Public Works: THEATER OF, BY AND FOR THE PEOPLE.

Before we have done more than open the outer cover, the word and layout have accomplished much. The establishment of a collective with the use of the word “Our,” and an explicit communication of both an intervention for mankind in the “proposal to humanity” and what it might look like “theater...and for the people” performs the intentions of the program with each reading. Before the recipient knows the full scale of what those intentions look like with this program, it has been reconstructed in text and print. Continuing on to page one, there is an explosion of images: An energetic shot from the final performance captures an expressive chorus of children and young adults costumed in bright colors. Page two: On the right-hand page, the viewer sees the text of the programmatic mission:

The Public has always been devoted to making theater that matters, that helps bind our community together by connecting us to the great issues and dilemmas of our time. Public Works, a major new initiative of the Public Theater, seeks to engage the people of New York by making them **creators and not just spectators**. (The emphasis is original.) Public Works deliberately **blurs the line between professional artists and community members, creating theater that is not only for the people, but by and of the people as well**.

[In a larger type size]

Working with partner organizations in all 5 boroughs, Public Works invites members of diverse communities to participate in workshops, take classes, attend performances, and most importantly, to join in the creation of

[in a still larger type size, and pink text]

ambitious works of participatory theater.

This language sets goals and intentions while outlining possibility without delimiting successful parameters. These words generate possibility and visually juxtapose the mission with

the colorful, cheerful, engaging shot of the desired “diverse community” who are making theater. Triumph and success re-occur with each reading. Additionally, the poses in the photo spread excite and bounce off the page: hands are raised, stances are wide, and brilliantly colored hats, flowers, and tutus dance for the eyes. This visual experience makes the reader use their imagination to conceive the full power of the triumphant, cumulative power of the Public Works theatrical program, offering glimpses into the final performance. Reducing this analysis to a simple marketing evaluation is simplistic; however, the words and images produced here are producing and doing the Public Works mission every time they are read. Every time the brochure reaches a new set of hands. Simply by understanding what Public Works does turns the receiver into a part of the “People” for whom this theater is made and intending to reach.

Pages three and four are a two-page spread that displays a graphic representation of the New York City boroughs and describe the partner organizations who are the “Bedrock” of Public Works. “Bedrock” is capitalized, implying a critical foundational element, and the return to the black, white, and magenta color scheme and map layout with icons that thematically indicate the partner groups areas of focus, e.g., a maple leaf for Brownsville Recreation Center, run by the City Parks Department, or the cloud that marks the placement of DreamYard in the Bronx. As a visual representation for laying out a crucial framework that is critical to Public Works, the spread is effective without being wordy. The presence and need for community partners is emphasized, and their value and role in the program architecture is prioritized in crediting.

The brochure continues with pages five and six: A two-page spread filled with candid, full-color photos of the Public Works participants, and on each page, the pink bold fonts pop out key words. “Everyone” sits across the fold from “Power” and the receiver makes a visual connection that at Public Works, everyone has power. Page seven shows a “360” approach that

emphasizes the circular, all-encompassing diagram that shows the methods of involvement for various constituencies who are all shown on page eight. “Of, by and for the people” is repeated in this layout, recreating that specific identifying theme against the strategy, juxtaposing the intended output against the strategies of engagement.

Pages nine and ten present a literal “Place of possibility” framing the two-page shot of Director of Public Works Lear deBessonnet addressing a seated group. Her body language is engaging and relaxed, her smile bright, and her hands are either applauding or energetically gesturing. The creation of a space of potential is reconstructed in this image, and with that inspiration, pages eleven and twelve document all the Public Works spaces of possibility, in signature pink highlighted text: Dance Training, Master Classes, Acting Classes, Play Readings, and Shakespeare Workshops, all linked to the partner organizations who collaborated to create these places of possibility. These layouts of strategy and approach culminate in a quote on pages thirteen and fourteen: Against a stark black and white graphical equation of New York City boroughs and The Public Theater logo, a pink quote reads, “The Bronx is The Public, Queens is The Public, Brooklyn is The Public — The idea of The Public is that it’s the people’s theater.” Here is another utterance of Joe Papp’s founding vision, effectively nestled within a printed brochure for an institutional program. The levels of iteration and repetition consistently perform both the programmatic and institutional identity, and with each utterance within the Public Works program, these identities are exposed to receivers to whom this performance is a new experience. The rest of the booklet continues in the same vein, with highlighted texts such as, “achieving our mission to use the arts to inspire” and “relationship building and leadership development” superimposed over engaging action photos of workshops. A two-page photo that shows the entire diverse Community Ensemble with arms outstretched on the steps of The Public

highlights the phrase “restore and build community.” A participant quote kicks off a montage of rehearsal shots with “I just kept coming and coming and coming...” flowing into professional, highly theatrical performance photos, and then the narrative cumulates with a page turn into an impressive numbered list of program statistics. Again, quantitative measurements can be useful; in this instance, they’re descriptively placed at the climax to highlight the delightful and surprising performance demographics with featured numbers that include 106 Community Ensemble members, 24 ballet dancers, 10 hip hop dancers, 12 Mexican folk dancers, 1 bubble artist, 1 ASL interpreter, and 3 taxi drivers. An impressive list regardless of context, but when these details are seamlessly incorporated into the journey of this re-telling, the reader’s experience is carefully crafted to progress along with the Public Works program and participants. The employment of deft language that evokes consistent ideas and themes against programmatic images results in more than an effective piece of marketing collateral or storytelling of a finished project. Instead, the reader goes along a philosophical journey, where curatorial ambition forms into a plan that is brilliantly implemented, and the successes and learnings that occurred carry into present and future moments. The continuous, consistent use of “we” and “us” plural personal pronouns, and the use of “our” when possessive, consistently performs this idea of collective community, and the reader becomes a member of this group.

Outside of this brochure, performativity is also found throughout detailed research compilation from 2012–2015. Part of this report is thirty-five pages that focus on the third-year production of *The Odyssey*, designed with a stylized layout and published for wider dissemination and consumption. This “documentary tale of community ensemble rehearsals and productions” is a beautiful publication, and uses the same color palette as the smaller booklet from year one. Page one begins with a letter to members of the community ensemble — even the

documentation is of, by, and for the people. Throughout the piece, pictures and highlighted words pop off the pages to the reader. Upon reading, words like “Courage” and “Genuine” resonate with images of laughing members of the community ensemble. According to the researchers, six important themes can be distilled from participants in their own words:

1. “Being a part of something big matters to my life now.”
2. “Learning new ways of taking care of myself and others makes me a better person.”
3. “I enjoy being someone going somewhere now.”
4. “I’ve learned how to plan, think ahead, and figure out what I’ve got to do to turn my plans into action.”
5. “The forces of long term learning keep pushing me.”
6. “It’s the pro’s, the experts, we work with that make this all come together for me. “
7. “Being in Public Works has helped me learn how to overcome disappointment, frustration, anger, and a sense of rejection.”
(Brice Heath and Lie Part 1 14)

These six recurring member reactions might be the crowning achievement of this participatory art community intervention at The Public. These results are not easily translated into measurements with economic impacts, ticket sales, or critical reviews; they would never have been presented as a noteworthy achievement in the funding conversation that opened this thesis. They are expressions of emotions, statements of self-worth, and reflections and memories; these are notably qualitative descriptives. These themes, however, directly reflect the humanistic goals set by the program designers, and are, by many standards, benchmarks or indicators of incredible success. What’s more, these expressions linguistically reiterate and execute the Public Works mission and intervention. From the beginning, Brice Heath, Eustis, and deBessonnet wanted to generate clear and lasting change for a broad group of disparate individuals, to build and extend a community through performance, and these statements perform those goals. Try reading them out loud, and listen to the statements. These emergent themes contain and circle

around elusive feelings, and the qualitative descriptions are descriptors of profound shifts in the lives for these Public Works participants. In each theme, the speaker makes a statement about forces outside themselves and a difference within themselves before and after the program. There is often an indicator of continuing into future possibilities. As Heath and Lie simultaneously caution and celebrate that it is not “possible to know how community ensemble members absorbed...the ethos and tone of the language used in rehearsals, [the] evidence strongly suggests the extent to which they did just this.” Although the researchers advise caution, their careful recording and illumination of these outcomes is revelatory. Participant experiences coalesce around shared moments, with particular attention to the director and leadership language used during the rehearsal process. This language repeated and amplified in the program and amongst the members is then transmitted outside of the Public Works process by these same program participants, but also through institutional ambassadors, marketers, and fundraisers. These themes continue to reproduce, inspiring new participants to join the program as old members cycle out. (Despite a 65% return rate from year one to year two, there is a three-year cap to participant involvement in the program, so that the opportunity to become a member is shared among more individuals.) To use a capitalist analogy, investment in Public Works reaps dividends long after the program concludes. The anthropological documentation critically facilitates and clarifies the success that can be constructed for those who do not directly experience Public Works, creating rich sources of language that can be mined for production and construction of the Public Works identity.

Although I was captivated by the printed booklet that detailed the third year of the program, I openly wept while reading the full 90-page report on the subway. These simple, typed pages contained so much information, story, and so thoroughly reinforced the identity of the

Public Works experience upon reading that the effect on me, as a much-removed receiver, was profound. This report compiled everything from audience statistics (and their collection methodologies) from performances in the Delacorte Theater in Central Park to behavioral patterns and culminates with learnings and recommendations for future affiliate programs. The entire second section of the report attempts to establish benchmarks for external recognition, audience composition, learning environment, and learning development, which makes for fascinating reading when one is considering the performativity of language to discuss theater and performance. The emotional reaction, however, was driven by one specific linguistic trend that occurred in the second year of the program and was noted by the researchers. Through the first year and a half, project members self-identified as being a part of “Public Works.” By the midpoint of the second year, however, a transition had occurred, and participants spoke of “being a part of The Public.” The significance of belonging to and having a role in The Public, the larger institution and the rights and responsibilities implied therein, reflect back to the theater of, by, and for the people. Returning to that metaphor of the body of The Public, the commitment and labor the Public Works citizenry gives to the organization benefits both the limb and the whole, and what’s more, the components of said appendage are also a part of the full body. Belonging to The Public in this way has value for the members of Public Works. “Everyone knows The Public, and they think that if I’m a part of that, I’m somebody.” My personal waterworks started upon receiving this utterance from this anonymous Public Works member. The deep enjoyment and pride that comes from this identification with The Public was palpable and effectively reconstructed for this reader. Not only was I moved, but the members of the program found pleasure in sharing their experiences with others outside of the program, so my experience is unlikely to be a singular one (Brice Heath and Lie 1, 11). When community ensemble members

from Public Works state that they are now a part of The Public, The Public is also part of them. The Public Works system is working for The Public, and what is more, it is working for a larger public, one that Joe Papp would like: Anyone and everyone who might encounter the language of the utility and find inspiration.

New Georges: 25 years of Feminist Theater

1. Background: Name and Gender as Identity

The power in an institutional name can make a promise to a community and audience, affirming a mutual commitment that is strengthened at every utterance. This case study focuses on New Georges, a small theater company whose name reflects their vow to serve an underserved group in New York City Theater. Officially founded in 1992, the New Georges theater company claimed a name that evoked another generation of women pioneers; the titular “Georges” are the pseudonyms of George Sand and George Eliot, two women who wrote under masculine pseudonyms in the nineteenth century. According to founder and Producing Artistic Director Susan Bernfield, the company origin story was rooted in the feminist resurgence of the early 1990s. In a fast-paced, engaging interview held in the New Georges tiny, Manhattan administrative offices, she cites the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, WAC protests in New York City, and pro-life demonstrators returning to actively protesting in New York City as background events that increased her awareness of being a woman in the world. It was just at this moment when Bernfield and her theater colleagues became increasingly and personally aware of the dearth of great roles for women³ performers and writers (Bernfield and Tiller). It seemed natural to go forth and create opportunity for women in theater, and so, New Georges was founded. When viewed through a performative lens, claiming the two “Georges” as namesakes for the organization links a younger generation of radical women flouting established societal

³ The use of the terms “women” and “woman” in this chapter include any individuals or individual who identify as a woman, as articulated later in this chapter. New Georges is quite clear that their mission also includes female identifying, gender non-conforming, and transgendered individuals.

norms to a history of rebellion by brilliant, bold women. Additionally, this company moniker aspirationally links to the respect and success that the two “Georges” achieved, setting a goal and expectation for the company and all the artists who work with it. The power in a name and the smart and consistent construction of identity, an assertion of inspiration, genius, gender, and purpose is reconstructed at every mention of the company title. New Georges affirms and revalues women in every project, publication, and production. In the following case study, a thorough examination of both the institutional name and identity is consistently reiterated and strengthened across programming strategies, projects, mission fulfillment and company ethos reveal the powerful impact that language can have in expressing performance outside of the time of its experience.

As a company, New Georges deliberately embraces an imaginatively theatrical, weird, and feminist lineage. Their producing models and timelines do not adhere to those of more typical New York City theatrical institutions, and the public face of their website cites the cause of opportunity for women as a primary, non-negotiable focus (New Georges). The prevalence of the word “feminist” in current social and political discourse and critique reveals that the word and concept, if not always beloved or agreed upon, is firmly returned to the politically challenged cultural lexicon. Furthermore, the limitations of women’s roles and lack of works by women in a patriarchal theatrical canon combine with systems of power and representation that continue the cycle of underrepresentation for women in the theater. The small amount of active support for women’s voices as writers or subjects with agency is widely acknowledged across the discipline, much to the frustration of women theater practitioners (de Gay and Goodman 4). There has been some focused attention to the gender disparity in the theater in recent years, resulting in recommendations to forge partnerships across social justice lines to strive for racial,

ethnic, class and gender diversity and inclusion, among other tactics for equal representation (Richards). Twenty-five years ago, though, prompted by her lack of access to opportunities as a writer and performer, Bernfield created her own intervention. She engagingly details her naïve approach to securing the rights to her first production of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* in a YouTube clip, reminiscing, "...it was a very feminist-y time" (New Georges). Bernfield cites her use of self-described "jolly" language as an intuitively developed practice she formed as an undergraduate editor. In order to develop multiple "entry points" into dry, boring, liberal arts papers, Bernfield credits her search for ways to draw in and captivate her readers as a formative process for her linguistic efforts for New Georges (Bernfield). Prompted by unequal access to opportunity in the theater, she set out to address the inequity in producing systems. In this context and officially founded in 1992, New Georges specifically addressed this need, choosing an organizational name that evoked another generation of women pioneers (New Georges).

In this founding and naming, we see evidence of Butler and Morrison's living system that supports the agency of those who employ and engage with it (*Excitable Speech*, 6). Although the container or vehicle for this "jolly" and specific language has shifted to a theater company, the desire for multiple points of entry for the reader remains the same. The consistent construction of company identity has become a focus, but the liveliness and linguistic precision continues. When compared with my experience with the historical theater company in the first chapter, that company locution suffers, and their weaknesses become even more pronounced. The expression of a company identity and mission that cuts across all their programming was exactly what was missing, and would have been solved with deftly employed, creative language. Names and labels can reveal additional layers of insight or challenge for the receiver and inspire deeper engagement by their communities.

Considering Bernfield's demand for specific, creative, and evocative theater, it does not surprise that she has similar expectations for all other forms of writing and communication. The power in the name of her company affirms (and re-affirms) her interest in labels that are clear *and* complex. Jacques Lacan, quoted by Judith Butler (*Excitable Speech* 30) states that "the name is the time of the object." Therefore, New Georges has an identity because of its name. However, Butler argues that this iteration of a proper name is also a time of exclusion, of "othering" in that the act of naming is also a setting apart, of a "designation that is supposed to confer singularity" (*Excitable Speech* 30.) The name New Georges creates an identity but also separates the company from all that it is not named, and in this case, the feminist root of the name clearly differentiates the organization from all other non-feminist theater companies in New York City. Furthermore, by using the "old" Georges as symbols to herald a new generation, Bernfield differentiates the company by adding a layer of complexity to its gender focus. Invoking George Sand and George Eliot is not a typical or every day expression of gender. It is a slightly obscure and "weird" signal for gender, yet an effective one once the label is understood. Butler's position that sex and gender are linguistic actions relates directly to the heart of New Georges: every iteration of the institution is a performance of the gender-centric mission, intervening, fighting, or subverting dominant trends within New York City theatrical production. New Georges has no permanent performance space. New Georges has no regular theatrical season. New Georges produces on a relatively small \$450,000 annual budget, and typically produces experiences on a modest Letter of Agreement contract from Actors Equity, the union for stage (or 'legit') actors. New Georges, like its namesakes, flouts traditional expectations in their field and as an intervention, utilizes its singular status and othering as an opportunity to subvert expectations as it serves its constituencies and fulfills its mission.

Before delving further, it is important to note that the concentrated support for women and women-identifying writers and artists at New Georges does not seek to curate their audiences with identical representation. Throughout their materials, there is neither a direct statement of rejection or sense of obstacle or pursuit for men to attend, facilitate, or watch the work. Men, nonbinary individuals, and in fact, all people are welcome. Indeed, those who are not women are often part of the productions as cast members or creative partners, but there is never a compromise of the founding ideals. (There is more detail on the gender-specific submission practice later in this chapter.) For example, New Georges co-produced Hilary Bettis' *Alligator* in December 2016 with The Sol Project, whose Artistic Director, Jacob Padron, identifies as a man. The rationale behind this alliance was a desire to foster the ideals of The Sol Project, aiming to develop a pipeline of Latino/a/x playwrights from workshops to regional theaters. This goal aligned with New Georges values, and the resulting partnership embodied both the New Georges woman-centric focus and The Sol Project's focus on Latin identity. The December 2016 production had the distinction of clearly aligning with the New Georges woman-centered goals and intersecting with other diversity aims, so the partnership was a strategic alliance that crucially empowered and featured an all-female creative team. The next generation of "Georges" (artists who identify as women) created new, weird, challenging work for audiences.

Similarly, New Georges' feminist focus renders the unnoticed into an observable phenomenon, generating effects outside of the onstage productions. By simply existing, being known, and being heard, New Georges forces a possibly uncomfortable examination of gender-based equity in the New York City theatrical landscape. Playwrights, directors, and performers who identify as women have fewer opportunities than men (Richards). Trends of employment and representation in the discipline that might otherwise remain undiscussed, glossed over,

denied, are iterated at the point of naming. If women had equal access to opportunity, would there be a need for feminist theater? What's more, if there is a need for feminist theater, what other omissions might necessitate theater companies that promote other marginalized or underrepresented identities? Other New York City theatrical institutions do not purport to exclude women; perhaps I am too generous, but I fail to see outright or overt desire to discriminate in the New York City theatrical community.

The reality, however, is that there is a lack of representation for not just women, but almost every other non-white male identity, if an approximation or even approach population representation is the goal. The lack of opportunity for women reflects the society that is generating the art, reproducing the same obstacles towards success as any other field or discipline. The lack of inclusion, participation, and representation, however unintended or unwitting, in the theater relates to a statement Butler makes on language in *Gender Trouble*: “Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogentric language, women represent the *unrepresentable*. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity. Within a language that rests upon univocal signification, the female sex represents the unconstrainable and undesignatable” (9). Assuming this analysis of language transfers to systems of theatrical development in New York City, the mission statements of various theatrical organizations do not represent the feminine when they speak with a singular gendered voice. While this argument might easily be expanded to include intersections of race, ethnicity, and class (as three examples), for the purposes of this case study, I will keep the focus to gender and New Georges. With language, and indeed, with naming alone, New Georges deliberately carves out a place in masculinist language that calls out for a women-centered space.

2. Performative Proof in the Publications

Although the New Georges name constructs an identity and challenges the status quo on utterance, performativity is consistently present in language in almost every communication. In the internet and paper publications explored below, examples are both rife and effective actions of the company mission and ethos. In this electronic age, most arts institutions recognize the power of their virtual real estate as a communications tool. New Georges seizes this space first opportunity to boldly confront the uninitiated with the institutional ambition and stake out a territory:

[New Georges is] a strategically small company with a national reputation as a vigorous home for theatrically adventurous artists (who are women). Through productions of highly theatrical new plays, several varieties of play and artist development programs, and our indispensable workspace, The Room, we support the largest ongoing working community of women theater artists in New York City (“Snapshot”).

While this could be a simple mission statement, which a requirement for all non-profit organizations in the United States, the statement above marks a territory and makes a promise. Most nonprofit organizations need to communicate a lot with this statement, potentially including but not limited to indicating target constituencies, programmatic goals, and clearly outlining ideals and an ethos. The resulting product is often muted, as expression of these ideas in few words can strip the statement to barest necessities. In the New Georges mission statement, key modifiers perform the audacious goals of the organization at the outset. “Strategically small” owns outright the size of the organization compared to others and positions it as a strength. The parenthetical “(who are women)” both highlights the gender identity of those the organizations serves while indicating the secondary position to adventurous and vigor-pursuant artists. “Highly theatrical” states the goal of imaginative and innovative artistic lines of inquiry, and the naming

of the real-estate asset known as “The Room” as indispensable instantaneously frames the space-poor plight of many theater practitioners and positions New Georges as a successful intervention for women theater-makers. Although the need for space is by far not unique to artists based in New York City, the realities of real estate accessibility for arts practitioners is acute and pronounced. New Georges, as stated in their mission, commits to helping to solve this problem in a neat, efficient sentence. Their long-term intervention is both promised and advertised in this mission statement, leaving no room for this project to disappear (for any reason, from decreased resources to ideological shifts) without a consensus from the New Georges Board of Trustees. The details in the New Georges mission statement do some heavy lifting, committing, promising, and beyond that, drive real change for their target demographics. By making these promises, attention is given to the fact that these gaps in resource and focus need to be addressed by the New York City theatrical scene.

The New Georges feminist revolution explodes all over their website, leaping off their page and into a dialogue with the receiver at every turn or click. Managing Director Jaynie Saunders Tiller owns that the identity-centric language is an asset for the company, and makes her job easier. “[It is] very relaxing and relieving to have language that is so rooted in the ethos of the company because if that guides it, then everything else will fall into place” (Bernfield). The performativity that results simultaneously accomplishes multiple tasks, easing Saunders Tiller’s logistical producing and administrative duties. In a fundraising email, strategically employed language establishes a need in a macro sense with re-assertion of the institutional identity; again, the company itself is an intervention addressing a series of specific needs, and naming it repeats that intervention. The consistent construction of identity positions any project as an extension of the original mission. Whether she is writing is a programmatic description, a

grant application, a marketing flyer, or a simple fundraising email, New Georges communications always build the company identity and goals. What's more, the New Georges woman-centric intervention is always centralized within any communicative act, from the website to promotional materials and everything in between. Creative stylings and evocations can emerge from this template of identity, permitting a robust, imaginative space for locution, allowing the language to act. The words invite, reiterate, command, vibrate, and ultimately build an experience and understanding of the company and the change it makes for website guests.

The New Georges website is a trove of information about the twenty-five-year-old company, with archives visible and promoted to first-time visitors. The legacy of the company links to the past, establishing a past history of need and intervention, while also sharing past creative journeys with newcomers. At every turn, visitors are exposed and confronted by the New Georges aims and ambitions. The visual design is functional, modern, and easily navigable, and also gives a spatial precedence to text as the primary communication tool instead of images. The landing page has a lineup of eight promotional pictures with "headlines" as links for upcoming and recent productions, and overall, the layout reads rather like the front page of a newspaper. One that jumps out as a personal favorite is one that also arrived in email form in late December 2016. The link on the home page cites an end of 2016 double match fundraising opportunity, excitedly trumpeting an "AUDACIOUS YEAR-END GOAL." End of year matching gifts are fairly common, but the descriptive employment of "audacious" as a modifier differentiates this announcement from requests at other organizations. The term asserts the boldness of the goal, the risk and reward implied in pursuing it, and the word itself, while accessible language, sits just outside of casual use, invokes the heightened, theatrical experiences curated and produced at New Georges. The word choice is efficient and evocative, constructing

an experience and identity in one shot.

Clicking on almost any link on the landing page initiates an inquiry, the first step in a virtual journey, establishing the vital need that New Georges seeks to address... More expressive language is found on the on the “Snapshot” page, an experiment in brevity found through a link on the left hand of the landing page. Many non-profit websites (and companies in general) simply title this page, “About Us” and share a mission statement, with perhaps a board list or staff directory. This information is included in the New Georges version, but here, the background of the organization is an assertion of the institutional identity. For example, under the “theater” listing, meaning the location of the stage/performance venue, the pink text states “happily nomadic” and links to a YouTube video of Bernfield touring the history of spaces where New Georges presented work since 1992. Pursuit of the stage location literally begins a video tour of the stages of New Georges past but does not decry the lack of a permanent space. The lack of a home stage is a strength to New Georges, allowing for flexibility in production needs, schedules, and imaginations.

There is one uncharacteristically weak spot on the “Snapshot” page in the second bright yellow highlight. The color draws your attention to this information, but it is surprisingly dull when contrasted with the powerful language that lives immediately alongside in other communications. This section is titled “By the numbers” and lists an impressive series of milestones:

- 44 world or New York premieres of new American plays
- 21 new-play commissions (18 produced)
- 11 festivals of new work
- 210 affiliated artists (playwrights, directors, actors, designers)
- 45 artists served in core programs annually
- Countless new works developed in The Room
- Honors for New Georges, its plays and its people include
- 3 Obie Awards, The Lilly Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the Kesselring

Prize

These numbers, though indicative of certain metrics of success, fail to resonate like the rest of the page and website, and indeed, stick out rather awkwardly. Lacking descriptives and contextual details, these stark, bare bones factual statements might demonstrate impact quantitatively, but these metrics jar and feel somewhat alien against the institutional ethos. Presentation of success by numbers does not fit if the goal is to resist and deconstruct traditional expectations. Luckily, this misstep is brief, and the “Snapshot” quickly returns to quirky, evocative territory.

Reading on, we emerge from numbers into a listing of projects that details “Current activities” and simply and bluntly list an array of projects. Brevity may be the soul of wit, but in this case, these short yet powerful program descriptions pull no punches when serving up programmatic impact. These bulleted items start off with a focus on nurturing the production of new plays “tending” to consist of two per season. Again, we see a refusal to commit to a producing schedule that fails to work for New Georges as an institution. Each production has unique requirements, and the company will not force two annual productions per year if it is not an organic fit. “The New Georges Jam” is a “performance gym,” for example, while the “Audrey Residencies” have a group initiative that “brings the full resident group together” (New Georges). A “performance gym” brings ideas of training and physical development to directors and writers to hash out performance ideas. A group initiative ensures that the often solitary conception of a playwright residency includes a collaborative and rich opportunity for creating community. When New Georges focuses on words that act, command, and do instead of metrics, programmatic ideals are elevated from jargon and reinforce project intent to great effect.

Elsewhere on the website, easily found under the “Work With Us” call to action, the New

Georges website holds a fully-fledged conversation with the reader. This printed locutionary act is charming yet effective in clearly outlining those who should apply to New Georges and how to do it. The page is titled “HOW TO KNOCK on Our DOOR” that pops directly into a question in slightly larger, yellow text: “Is your play weird, or weird-ish?” This charming, whimsical inquiry that immediately sets the New Georges aesthetic firmly within an “other” category. The page functions as a flow chart to help individuals seeking connection to New Georges navigate information and process. Performatively, the brilliant engagement kicks off with four questions at the top of the section:

1. Are you a woman*?
2. Is your play weird, or weird-ish?
3. Are you at least partly based in New York City?
4. Will you not mind if we take a while to get back to you?

The New Georges programmatic focus is constructed in these four questions. Readers know that being a woman (or, based on the asterisk clarification, identifying as such) is a requirement, and what’s more, it is, for once, the priority. The naming of woman as an other, to revisit Butler, pushes against norms in the discipline by asserting singularity. Women come first with the reading of this question, even before there is an answer. Similarly, a play being weird, or “weird-ish” mandates a level self-knowledge and perception about where one’s work might land within a continuum of audience, curatorial, or critical consumption forces an interested artist to consider their work in the context of others. The added quirk of a made-up, imaginative but not-quite-real word infuses a creative spirit while opening up possibilities to the reader. The third question positions that New Georges resources are limited in location to New York City. Question four clearly articulates the strained resource balancing act that is endemic to so many theatrical producing organizations. An undercurrent or latent interpretation might also reveal

precedence given to projects and artists who already have the artistic attention of the company.

In these four brief inquiries directed at the reader, we learn so much about New Georges as focused, direct, and expressive institution. The constructing of the institutional identity continues and goes significantly more in-depth as the page continues:

Question 1: Are you a woman?

Take your time, we'll wait.

We're being glib (*and to be more specific, we work with female-identified, trans and gender-nonconforming people) because we know from long experience that the *woman* part of our mission doesn't always seem forthright to everyone...

Here's the deal: it's about opportunity, not content. So even if your play tells a "woman's story," or has lots of great parts for women actors, if you happen to be a guy, it's still not gonna cut it woman-wise, not with us. Our mission is to provide *opportunity* to a female-identified artist no matter *what* her play or project is about. For that matter, if you're a woman playwright but think your play's subject matter or cast make-up might not be "woman-ish" enough for us — it's not an issue, just send the thing!

The frank clarity in this address is rare and astonishing. Not only is the process outlined clearly for outsiders who seek opportunity in a limited field, but the rationale of providing opportunity for women is highlighted with italics. The further articulation and inclusion of identities that are not women demonstrates an inclusivity and generosity that focuses on the desire to provide opportunity to the underserved or marginalized. Clearly articulated goals and boundaries that delimit New Georges gender specific artistic constituency are humorously set against the reality of the submission and applicant pool. The casual engagement with the reader with the vernacular "gonna," is direct, yet familiar and friendly. The culmination into the imperative to "just send the thing!" is a direct attack on self-doubt. The command subverts any possibility of imposter syndrome, common among women of achievement, by demanding submission from the applicant (Clance and Imes). When I compare this direct address to applicants to the funding conversation in the introduction, the power of the language hits me full

force. More than any folder with playbills and marketing postcards, here the reader knows exactly what New Georges does, the level of intensity committed to their mission, and a tone that reflects their forthright, self-deprecating, encouraging approach to supporting women playwrights.

Analyzing the next three questions is slightly more straightforward, as the answers are both increasingly succinct and dependent on determining factors from the applicant.

Question 2: is your play weird, or weird-ish? We advance unusual plays, plays which futz with language or storytelling, often poetic, always funny, somehow stylized and almost always structurally innovative plays, or plays that relate to the audience in a nontraditional way; theater that's trying to point to or amplify experience rather than reflect it and gives audiences a new way to think about how theater can interpret the world. In fact, *how* you tell the story is often more interesting to us at first than what the story is *about*.

The words used to characterize an ideal New Georges play are “unusual,” “innovative,” and “nontraditional” These terms delineate an artistic aesthetic while breaking down areas where these adjectives might manifest in a play, such as storytelling, poetics, or humor. The idea of amplifying theatrical experiences for audiences sets up the emphasis on the italicized “*how*” having more evaluative consideration than “*about*.” There is potential for the preference in method to become less interesting than subject matter on subsequent reads. The institutional priorities are clearly delimited, and it is up to the reader to self-determine if they meet the criteria.

Question 3: Are you at least partly based in New York City? We're a little greedy, and a little nosy, and we do want to know what *everybody* is working on all over the country, nay, the world! But because we're interested in long-term development of new works and long-term relationships with artists, the reality is that if you're not here, or near here, or *sometimes* here... it's harder to find opportunities together. If you're not obviously here but are often here, feel free to let us know about your relationship to our city.

“Location, location, location!” is more than just a real estate catchphrase. With these words, New Georges humorously centers itself in New York City while harboring ambitions and appreciation for artists everywhere. The fluidity permitted around proximity or duration to the City is slightly more inclusive, but clearly, the company has no funds to bring artists in from out of town.

Question 4: Will you not mind if we take a while to get back to you? We’re a very small company. Sometimes we take a while. We appreciate your patience, truly.

Again, the size of the company is emphasized, acknowledging limited resources of time and attention. The implicit assumption is that if you disregard this warning and expect a quick response, the prospective artist is likely to be disappointed. The expression of gratitude is a respectful nod to the hopes and dreams for prospective applicants and reveals the caring attitude New Georges has for artists, both in and outside the company. Once the expectations around gender are established, the remaining limitations are ones of self-perception regarding the type of work an artist might submit, their physical location, and their willingness to wait for a response. The New Georges submission process might be frustrating, but at least it is straightforward, as opposed to most submission processes that will never acknowledge most unsolicited scripts, much less explain the methodology for review and consideration. At New Georges, the clarity around this process empowers the artist to know what to expect before they submit, as opposed to reinforcing a power dynamic that requires an applicant to blindly hope for the best when processes are not clearly defined.

Before leaving this page, two statements bear more examination. The first exhorts the reader to keep reading just “[a] little more elaboration, cause we work in an unusual way.” The

importance of this statement, both a warning and a promise, positions the New Georges model as different from others in New York City Theater. The statement continues, explaining, “We look for artists with whom we may have an affinity, and work by building relationships over time and seeing what projects emerge.” The artistic pipeline at New Georges is thus illuminated and articulated for outsiders and makes a promise for those who move into it, managing future expectations and describing the flexibility of the collaborative process. The next paragraph provides even more light, beginning with, “That’s why we don’t read play submissions with production in mind, though we know that may be what you’re looking for.” Again, there is a subversion of traditional play submission expectations or hopes, but in a straightforward, refreshingly honest perspective that continues to articulate the company ethos of long-term conversations and partnerships with writers and artists who send interesting, weird or weird-ish work in for consideration. The repetition and consistent reassertion of institutional priorities and values build a company narrative and identity. This recirculation assists aspiring artists to self-select in or out of the applicant pool by managing their expectations and while simultaneously and clearly communicating the company’s artistic values.

Thus far, the examination of language has only looked at excerpts from the New Georges website. By no means has this analysis completely rendered the available material. I chose highlights, opting for exemplary deployments of language that in my experience, are somewhat rare and unexpected in theater, maintain character, impact, and information.

Layered creativity and multiple meanings of goals and expectations are also evident in the organization’s printed materials. In the fall of 2016, New Georges celebrated its 25th anniversary; for a wedding anniversary, the occasion would be known as the “silver” anniversary. Accordingly, this print invitation was for a “Silver Belles” celebration, with the pun

for the anniversary and the “Belles” representing the women artists of the New Georges quarter century. The invitation is simple with a black and white text layout on one side and a silver “25” on the other half, folded widthwise into four equal sections, or quarters (Silver Belles). The symbolism moves from the explicit to the subtle, and the invitation to celebrate “25 highly theatrical years” reminds the recipient about all the theatrical aesthetics that differentiate New Georges from other theater companies. The details for the evening read differently from most invitations of this type that I receive, as they are “highly” descriptive: “In this vibrant duplex penthouse in a converted thread factory, color, texture, and pattern offer sumptuous floor-to-ceiling surprises. Weary of living out glamorous Art Deco fantasies on the lower floor? Just board the red and gold trompe l’oeil elevator and rock the casbah up on the roof.” The exhortation of the setting draws in skeptical potential guests with a promise that this is a unique fundraiser, unlike most other highly priced ticketed events that occur in a standard event space. Even in this simple communication, the institutional perspective and priorities are clear. Wit is celebrated, wordplay is championed, and above all, unique experiences are always the goal.

A second physical publication is a season announcement for the 2015 New Georges season (Bernfield). This document subverts design expectations and surprises its recipient, engaging upon receipt. It is a single sided, white 11” by 17” glossy color print, but when pulled out of a standard office envelope, it initially unfolds like a conventional communication. The New Georges sunburst like logo sits at the top of what appears to be a letter, with quotes praising the organization leading into the season announcement letter that follows. While there are many elements that demonstrate performativity upon examination in this piece, from Bernfield’s plea for investment to her prediction of significant positive change in female representation in theater, the layout of this piece is even more captivating. The specific,

precise folding of this document, which Managing Director Jaynie Saunders Tiller carefully executed at the end of our interview, reveals the cunning design. Efficiently laid out to effect multiple messages on each folded surface, the act of unfolding constructs a narrative for the reader. Initially, the piece looks like a standard fundraising letter. Flip it over, and it presents a loose assemblage of project listings and program initiatives, including a (then) currently playing production. This spread then opens to full display, and the ingenious layout becomes even more brilliant, with the loosely presented dotted lines on the previous design incorporated against the letter to illustrate a frame, with a tie into the mention of the current production to its image. To this recipient, the communication of the design was incredibly instructive, and my discovery and journey as I unfolded and read it made me laugh aloud. The creative effort that went into conceiving the design, layering the messaging and laying out the specific folding process exemplifies the passionate artistry that is typical of New Georges. Perhaps most importantly, the document also succeeds at issuing an end of year donation request.

Whether in naming print, conversation, or on the internet, New Georges performs its singularity and differentiated mission statement effectively with language. As a theater company dedicated to fostering women writers, performers, directors, and producers, it seems apt that the organizational language is specific and clear. However, New Georges goes beyond clarity and effectively constructs and builds when it communicates. The small size of the company allows an intimacy between the artistic leadership and communication generation that mandates and supports consistent demonstration of the company values across all mediums. Performative language helps New Georges find the constituencies it wants to serve, empowers aspiring audiences and artists, and reflexively respond to its community. From its founding moments to the work that continues in the present and plans for the future, the power and

rejection of norms that are evident in their linguistic choices reveal complexities to the organization that consistently reiterate the tenets upon that inspired the company's origin.

Conclusion

“Words, life, and all, old Lancaster has spent.” The title of this thesis begins with a phrase from act 1, scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* announcing the death of Gaunt (35). Is there a better way to discuss performativity and the power of words than in the context of life and death? In this Shakespearean scene, to communicate and use words is life, and silence equals death. If the words used to discuss performance are not chosen with care and are not recognized to go forth and to “do things,” the result is a type of death — a failed reception by receivers. This death by silence may not seem important if a singular program fails to effectively communicate, but when it occurs and re-occurs across the discipline, a pattern emerges. Through this pattern of linguistic silence, valuation questions can emerge, and theater (and performance and culture) is threatened. For over twenty-five years, conversation in the arts has struggled to reflect the perception of public value lost during the Culture Wars. The capacity of performative language to create and act is one effective, underemployed method that can reassert value and influence communities and publics. While I do not think that anyone in the theater who is not successfully using the full power of language is seeking to silence an artist or to close an institution, failing to pay attention to linguistic action is a critical error. In the desperation to stay operational, artists and institutions fail to recognize the vital power of language.

When viewing projects and institutions as bodies, the language that flows between the parts of the whole is an important system, frequently under-acknowledged and under-supported. This system enacts crucial tasks, such as consistently iterating institutional and programmatic identity and goals, outreach to communities, and empowering those who engage with the discourse of these systems to transfer those words and acts outside of their original utterance.

Within these bodies, the role of the curator is vital. The curator, who functions as the decision maker and support, intermediary, and interlocutor for both artists and publics, is in a singular position. Curators are uniquely positioned to understand all of their target populations and therefore can develop, nurture, and shape language that can effectively act for all. While this is not an easy task, and may be perceived as yet another thankless burden for curators, it is an absolute necessity. The curator's ability to find language that acts, creates, links, organizes and constructs outside of the time of the staged experience drive significant change in the valuation of theater by both the presenting artists, critics, staff, audiences, and funders. The critical need for deft linguistic deployment across the sector notwithstanding, the opportunity to reach all these targets with the same language also unifies these subdivided groups into one, all of whom share the same linguistic experience.

As curators (and artists and institutions) consider how to discuss, present, or linguistically engage others with their work, it is imperative to use language that is specific and evocative. This concept might seem reductive, obvious, or elementary, especially for a discipline that frequently employs words onstage, but the degree to which language remains under-considered and effectively deployed in discussing performance is shocking. As both a theater artist and as a grantmaker, I consistently encounter artists, board members, executive leaders and curators who are unable to advocate effectively for their work, much less discuss it with clarity. Whether their words are simply lacking imagination or because what needs communicating has been forgotten, using words that act is critical in the context of advocacy. When a consistent, evocative linguistic approach is employed, a sense of the performed work outside of the time of the experience is constructed. As a tool, speaker-based linguistic analysis is useful. When performatives are employed by the advocate or artist, or artist representative, the artist or institution is able to act

with language. Attention must be paid to the language used to activate an artistic experience or performance, while not trying to limit or encapsulate.

For example, the language from the Public Works rehearsal room re-appears in exit interviews and self-reflection from participants, and then again, those words positively reflect the overall mission of The Public, living and extending beyond their initial utterance. Additionally, the vocabulary that centers on the specific “Public” for whom this program is “working” amplifies the goal of the program and is carried forth into performance, and continues to be carried by program participants as they describe the effect the program has had on their lives. The exponential power of this linguistic repetition can carry forth into participants’ communities and beyond. The New Georges focus on women, including gender nonconforming, non-binary, and transgender individuals, is reiterated in every mention of their name, spreading the need for that focus to every receiver who encounters their programming. While addressing potential artistic partners, New Georges clearly establishes their focus on women and women-identified writers, directors, and actors. Their “highly theatrical” aesthetic also is re-performed with each mention of the name, as the layering of a reference demands a familiarity with a feminist heritage for full comprehension. Employment of vivid language performs the expectations that the company fosters across its programs and productions. In both case studies, the language used to communicate the artistic work has been carefully considered, cultivated, and yes, curated. Performatives may not have been explicitly intended as linguistic theory, but they are certainly used across their communications.

The words used by New Georges and Public Works effectively and simultaneously addresses various constituencies, both prospective and extant, including but not limited to artists, audiences, funders, and staff. In both cases, the vocabularies they develop and employ do things,

such as constructing identities, either of the organization or the project, and/or performs the values at the heart of the program.

I offer these observations and report my own reactions in an attempt to illuminate another way of looking at, analyzing, and talking about theater and performance. For so many reasons, improved communications should be a priority across the sector. The perilous state of the field, as measured in one way by a continued political resistance to federal funding, does not reflect the actuality of popular appreciation of arts and culture. Detailing the ways in which employment of language can shift an artistic conversation from a defensive position to an assertive, positive one is applicable across the discipline and sector. Talking about the arts is not simply marketing. It is not just development. The debate of the value of culture will never be won as long as artists and institutions are communicating in ways that are detrimental to the field as a whole. Although competition is natural, and indeed, can spur creative problems solving within economies, linguistic engagement across the field must improve to accurately reflect the value of the arts and empower greater advocacy. The language from these two case studies represents only two instances of organizations who are consistently employing deft and powerful language; others have different strategies. By sharing them these two, however, I hope to encourage other artists and organizations to reflect the larger impact of how to talk and drive change with words.

In my professional role as a grantmaker, I have not supported or facilitated a grant proposal for either of these projects. Instead, I encountered these organizations as a prospective audience member. I encountered Public Works and New Georges through personal conversations with fellow artists, and as I became familiar with their work, I was captivated and compelled to learn more. I found their names to be multi-layered and clever, but once I discovered the language that evoked the reach and impact of the programs, I wanted to experience more. As I

tried to understand my strong and profound reactions to the clarity and precision of their messaging, I realized these approaches might provide insight for my professional life as well. These exemplary models of linguistic employment illustrate the unharnessed power and vitality that is possible when discussing and situating theater. I admit it: I wept on the subway while reading the Public anthropological report. I was deeply moved by the resonance of the participants' words, set against the ambitious programmatic goals and echoing the supportive directorial language from the rehearsal room. These remarks made Public Works come alive, bringing me into the promise and fulfillment of a collaborative theatrical project. I wish I had seen any of the final productions. I am aiming to be there in 2017, if I can get tickets. I imagined a participant's possible trajectory, from a first-time introduction to the awe-inspiring Public Theater through nine months of community building. I saw periods of growth and challenge blossom into a final communal triumph on the Delacorte stage. Public Works words activated my imagination and empathy in a real and visceral way. Unlike that meeting from the first chapter where I twisted myself up trying to find a way into that theater company, with Public Works I envisioned the reactions of friends and family during the show; I related feelings of pride and accomplishments to similar markers in my own life. I empathized with the frustrations at various obstacles and felt truly sad as I read about the realizations that about the ephemeral and fleeting nature of the final performance. As an outsider who was never in rehearsal, in the community of, or onstage with Public Works, and who encountered most of her exposure through printed materials and their website, I feel as if I know the project experience intimately.

When I heard about New Georges and finally took the time to explore their website, I had a strikingly similar embodied, emotional experience of recognition and imagination. I laughed outright when reading their call for submissions, nodding emphatically as I found versions of

myself in the weirdly honest call for submissions and passionate desire for diverse representation both onstage and off. Who hasn't felt like an outcast? Even if one does not identify as a woman, the call to participate is so strong that the organization must consistently re-issue their company focus to deter men who apply. After our interview in their administrative office on a rainy March afternoon, New Georges Managing Director Jaynie Saunders Tiller smiled as she concentrated on precisely folding the 2015 season letter into a complicated structure. I realized I was eagerly anticipating the moment where I might deconstruct her efforts and understand both the smile and the complicated paper; I wanted to experience the messages and intentions hidden in the folds of that letter for myself. Later, when I carefully undid the creases and followed the sweeping timeline and connections that stemmed from Susan Bernfield's love letter to her community, I understood Jaynie's grin, and I belonged, albeit momentarily, to that group of recipients who read that note fifteen months prior. I imagined both the season and the joyous engagement of the New Georges collective, and I felt the call to support their efforts.

These experiences are so different from my trying encounter in the first chapter when I was directly asked to support that historic theater company. I labored to find a way into any sort institutional or programmatic narrative, resulting in twisted legs, crossed ankles and a pressing need for the bathroom. That day, both the Executive Director and I labored to understand each other; I wanted to understand. I was desperate to find a connection or narrative to comprehend or imagine their work and approach to their community. In contrast, as a receiver for the materials in these case studies, I never struggled to understand their messaging. The path was lit for me with language that invited, instructed, and evoked, but did not try to encapsulate. Although I have never have given a grant to either group to date, I now consider myself to be a fan and ambassador. I would love to sit across the table and discuss either Public Works or New Georges

in a grantmaking or advocacy context. I understand their work its effects more than many of the programs and institutions to whom I have awarded funds, and I know that I would not have to forge my way through a gap in understanding in order to rationalize the need for these programs in their communities.

Unleashing the power of the performative requires an understanding of language to perform, create, and do, but also needs imagination and creativity to use it in ways that make evocative contextual sense. Both case studies use inventive vocabularies and word usage that ring outside of the spectrum of most casual speech but do not alienate while they successfully evoke the ethos of their artistic goals. The words Public Works and New Georges evoke empathy, transport the listener, reach out and engage their receivers. There are always many attractive and appealing ways for a reader to discover recognition and understanding. These two case studies reveal explicit examples of linguistic action; other curators and artists may learn from them. Institutions who are already creating and generating great work do not need to reinvent themselves, but instead, examine the ways they use language to communicate their work. In that examination, they may find new ways that language can also be used *to do* their work. I believe that the work of artists, of performance, of the theater, remains one of the best and most instructive parts of our humanity. In the theater, the power of life of onstage will always be at the center, but there is an important need to recognize the power of the words used to discuss and present the work. Without the sharing, discussion, advocacy, and even controversy that can take place through language, the field will remain weaker than popular opinion warrants, with the work consistently undervalued in various economies. We must employ persuasive communications that act and empower their receivers to go forth and redeploy these utterances. We must be able to effectively re-communicate the power of own experiences and convictions.

Language communicates, but language *is* also culture. In our challenging, confusing, ceaselessly changing world always on brink of, in, or recovering from natural, political, humanitarian, and financial crises, the arts must endure. Let us use our words to communicate, to bring renewed life to the discipline and field, and to bring together fractured and fraught society. Doing so will assert the complete value and rightful that theater, performance, and the arts should have in our communities. Culture must be communicated and effectively transmitted. We must do more with our words.

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