Constructing the Spectator:

Reception, Context, and Address in Lesbian Performance

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In the spring of 1985 a headline appeared on the cover of The New York Native—a gay newspaper—that proclaimed “Peggy Shaw: Master of Lesbian Theatre.” Shaw is a member of Split Britches, a company that grew out of the WOW Cafe (Women’s One World), a lesbian performance venue on New York’s Lower East Side. That summer Shaw predicted that the 1985-1986 season would be remembered as the year of the lesbian. She was right. Compared to a dearth of lesbian performance only a couple of years ago, lesbians and lesbian experience have been visible in a range of performance contexts from small theatres like WOW, and clubs in the East Village like the Chandalier, to Jane Wagner’s and Lily Tomlin’s hit show on Broadway.

An understanding of how the lesbian performer represents herself onstage is useful not to separate and valorize her forms of expression as unique from those of everyone else, but to understand how some lesbian performance has begun to push at the boundaries of representation itself. The many kinds of lesbian theatre can be distinguished from each other not only in terms of form, content, and style but in terms of the ways in which lesbian performers position themselves in relationship to spectators. How the spectator is constructed through the performance context and by the performer’s design, suggests a distinction between the lesbian as performer and the lesbian as renegade performer.

Reader response or reception theory posits that there is a reader or spec-
tator implicit in every text or performance piece. It rejects the notion of an a priori text. Instead, the text exists as a result of the activity of reading. While reader response theory does not assume that a text is an objective entity that exists totally separate from our reading of it, it also does not imply that the text is merely a subjective invention generated by the reader’s imagination. During the process of reading, the reader’s imagination fills in what is not there, but that which is not there is nonetheless directed by the text’s intention. Intention is immanent in the text. The reader both fills in and fulfills what is already implicit in the text, including the presumed gender and sexual orientation of the reader.

While performance concretizes physically—visually and aurally—what a text merely suggests, it is no less dependent on a reading of it than its words would be in scripted form. If a script demands more effort—requires more on the part of the reader’s imagination—a performance is infinitely more complex in the demands of its reading patterns and codes. In the dimension of time alone, a performance does not allow the reader to stop and reread a passage—the spectator must keep pace with the performance, moment-to-moment deciphering its codes while responding intellectually and emotionally to them.

Jonathan Culler suggests that the success of any reading effort, that is, the ability to make meaning of a text, or in this case, performance, is dependent on the spectator having previously assimilated certain conventions. This assimilation process creates a degree of reader/spectator competence, or the ability to read a performance at all. To be competent then, requires that the reader digest a system of conventions that leads her to relate or equate certain moments and pieces of a performance with corresponding dominant culture notions of what constitutes a proper interpretation and response. For Culler, the ostensibly private activity of reading is in fact the result of publicly sanctioned conventions or rules that the reader has internalized in the process of learning how to read. In an essay on response criticism in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, Jane P. Tompkins recognizes and foregrounds the implications of this when she points out that Culler “locates the organizing principle of textual interpretation not in the reader but in the institutions that teach readers to read.”

The project for feminists, then, is not only to resist dominant culture readings, but to somehow cause a rupture in the organizing principle of reading itself and, thereby, affect a change in the rules that make representation intelligible to us. If representation is the means by which we understand ourselves and communicate that understanding to each other, and if representation is responsible for reality as well as a reflection of it, then the fact that the prevailing means for producing representation are gender-specific, becomes the most compelling issue to address. A change in content, form, and style together with a change in the way a performance constructs its spectator may put enough pressure on the seams of the
representational apparatus to cause a tear in its fabric.

In order to chart the parameters of the argument in general, I'll begin on the extreme end of the lesbian performer continuum with lesbians who make non-linear feminist theatre for women spectators, borrowing techniques from the experimental collective theatres of the last two decades, but without specifically lesbian content. This kind of performance conflates lesbian with "woman" and presumes that lesbian experience can be subsumed in that of all women. The functional assumption here is that social change is conceivable only by reaching the largest possible spectatorship and to achieve this end the visibility of the lesbian must be sacrificed to the more encompassing concern of change for all women. Ironically, in its attempt to generalize and universalize the content and materials of performance and to create a form appropriate for expressing women's experience, much feminist performance becomes trapped in a women's theatre ghetto, polarized and paralyzed by the very generalizations it implies exist in its spectatorship. The trap is that of essentialism—the impulse or ideological underpinning of cultural or radical feminism.

The difficulty here is not simply that the lesbian is invisible, her content and experience missing—adding it, stitching her content in like adding sleeves to a shirt, would not essentially alter the garment's pattern or construction. This kind of performance presumes and posits a female spectator/subject that replaces representation's consistent, generic, universal male subject, but shares the same qualities of generalized, universal, subjectivity. The presumed, essential female subject is substituted for the generic male with reactionary rather than subversive results.

Jane Wagner's and Lily Tomlin's enormously successful production on Broadway, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, is an example of the lesbian writer and performer constructing a female spectatorship without silencing the lesbian's voice. Wagner's play is peopled with many characters, and Tomlin plays them all. While the content is not exclusively lesbian, lesbians and lesbian issues are presented alongside heterosexual concerns throughout the performance. In much the same way that comedy teams like George Burns and Gracie Allen had their own shtick, in the form of a subplot, when featured in Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby films, lesbian stories in Wagner's and Tomlin's production are not subsumed in the heterosexual narrative—while intertwined, they tend to exist side by side.

Unlike film's comedy teams, in "Search for Signs" lesbians are not constructed primarily to provide comic relief—they are portrayed as having the same life, love, and career problems as heterosexuals. Lynn, the central character in Act II's play-within-a-play, goes from a repressive relationship with a man to an equally repressive relationship with a woman—a performance artist who uses her. Lynn's lover is the mother of "Agnes Angst," a teenager Tomlin plays in Act I. Because she is a lesbian, Agnes's mother
LILY TOMLIN

has lost custody of her child—one of the reasons for Agnes’s angst.

Edie and Pam are lovers whose relationship is modeled on the nuclear family. They are, perhaps, portrayed too positively. They come off as “super-lesbians” in much the same way blacks were constructed in some Sidney Poitier films—flawless, incapable of doing wrong. Pam and Edie have a monogamous, enduring relationship. They use a turkey baster to impregnate Pam and produce a boy-child-prodigy they refer to as the “turkey-baster kid.” He is accomplished enough to perform at Carnegie Hall—every mother’s dream?

The fact that Tomlin and Wagner unabashedly present lesbian characters and material from a feminist perspective in a Broadway context has subversive undertones just by virtue of the way it plays, the theatre it plays in, and the spectators it plays to. Ultimately, however, it too falls into a trap of its own design. While Wagner and Tomlin insistently foreground feminist and lesbian issues, the core problem—the representational frame from which their message emanates—remains intact. In a single short scene from a much larger and complex play, Wagner and Tomlin demonstrate, if not dismantle, the dilemma.

As two prostitutes, both played by Tomlin, mime the action of climbing into a car, it is established that the man behind the wheel is not just another trick. On the contrary, he is just another author writing an article on “the life.” Tomlin plays Tina seated on the passenger side in the front seat, and Brandy seated directly behind her. She does not play the man—she in-
icates his presence by turning her head in his direction periodically while she talks about her life.

As the women reveal their lives through anecdotes, the issues are foregrounded: women as trade, commodity, and use value in both the sexual and literary marketplaces. The women's voices as historical, social subjects are to be appropriated by this spector of a man, this authority who, while invisible and silenced, remains in the driver's seat, as it were, in control of the representational apparatus. The driver of his own desire, the women are there for his purposes, to meet and fulfill his ends—though visible they are nonetheless subsumed in dominant discourse.

Wagner punctuates this poignantly when at the end of the scene Brandy suggests that she and Tina get a tape recorder and become writers. She says to the author, "We could be writers if what you're writin' is what we're talkin'." She adds, "When that article comes out it'll say written by so-and-so but it oughta at least say lived by Brandy and Tina."

Since it is generally agreed that representation is grounded, seemingly inextricably, in the dynamics of sexual difference, and since heterosexuality is the cultural and social institution where this difference is played out, it may be necessary to obliterate the heterosexual model in representation as the first step in bringing about radical change. What happens when heterosexuality is dropped from a performance address? Is it possible to side-step both an implicit heterosexuality and a gendered spectator in a work?

To draw distinctions between traditional and renegade lesbian performers is in some sense absurd since the lesbian is a social and cultural renegade by definition. But a new lesbian performance is emerging in the East Village in which the lesbian performer has ceased to perform herself for conventional, heterosexual spectators and has instead turned her attention primarily in the direction of renegades like herself.

In style, this new lesbian theatre echoes the camp performances of Charles Ludlam and Ethyl Eichelberger. But they are not alike. The spectator for gay male performance is male—both gay and straight. In using heterosexuality as a model for its farce, Theatre of the Ridiculous tends ultimately to be all about heterosexuality. The theatre of WOW Cafe's Holly Hughes, Alice Forrester, Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Alina Troyano (Carmelita Tropicana), and Lisa Cron, for example, tends to undercut the heterosexual model by implying a spectator that is not the generic, universal male, not the cultural construction "woman," but lesbian—a subject defined in terms of sexual similarity.

As lesbian, the spectator is a subject whose desire lies outside the fundamental model or underpinnings of sexual difference. In her essay "One is Not Born a Woman," Monique Wittig defines the lesbian subject as one that
is not-man, not-woman. As such, she is positioned outside of male ideology altogether. When the lesbian performer uses her desire for other lesbians as the driving force in her work, her representation of herself for others like herself becomes a model played out in time, with people, and in space of a self-sufficient system that drops the male subject and sexual difference from the address. Instead of a propelling force or organizing principle that depends on the construction of an OTHER, lesbian desire might be understood as implosive—a collapsing or bursting inwards towards those defined in like terms.

Unlike much feminist theatre, WOW artists do not separate themselves from popular culture and dominant forms in an attempt to find an essentially female voice and design new expressive forms to valorize it. WOW artists freely appropriate features and forms of popular performance, side-stepping sexual difference by replacing it with sexual similarity, while at the same time retaining gender, or the residue of sexual difference that people “wear” in stance, gesture, movement, mannerisms, voice, and dress. Comedy is central to the new lesbian theatre where playing styles are broad and butch/fem iconography informs much gender play. The homogeneity of same-sex relationships is combined with the heterogeneity of gender roles.

While the work of many WOW artists could be used to demonstrate this theoretical position, the struggle of the lesbian performer to represent herself on her own terms is particularly evident in Holly Hughes’s production of her play *Lady Dick*, presented at WOW last fall.

By combining the words lady and dick, Hughes makes an ironic comment on reversal as a solution to the problem’s of women’s position in representation. As terms, lady and dick are different not only in meaning, but in significance or weight. When the dick character specific to detective genre films is appropriated, or crossed-dressed, as a lady, the result is a spoof. When the transcendental, mythic lady who exists across many genre films wears the dick gender role, the result is a darker, more threatening kind of comedy. The lady/fem cannot simply be placed in the dick/male role or position in narrative as a solution to the problem of how to position women as speaking subjects in representation. The entire model, or “socio-symbolic contract” in Julia Kristeva’s words, must be addressed and subverted. Hughes puts a great deal of pressure on the representational frame when she places a lesbian in the dick role, and she forces the means of production—the apparatus of representation—to bend for her purposes.

Hughes’s text presumes that the sexual orientation of the reader is lesbian, and her production presumes that gender is not sex-class-specific. She treats gender as a social construction, a role, or a system for acting out social and sexual tastes and preferences. Erving Goffman has written,

1. Jill Dolan was the first scholar to posit and delineate this theoretical argument in her paper for the Lesbian Panel of the ATA conference in San Francisco, August 1984.
"One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender identity." Gender portrayal is made up of individual pieces of gesture, movement, mannerisms, clothing, and styles for hair that can be used to build a costume of gender that a character can wear. In building this metaphorical costume of gender in a same-sex context, individual gender features can be combined and recombined to signal the creation of new imagery, new metaphors, and new conventions that can be read, or given new meaning, by a very specific spectator.

The overall importance of Hughes's words and gender play is her insistence on sexual imagery and motifs that can be read by the lesbian spectator. For example, her text is filled with references to fish, fish odors, and white meat, that she links directly and specifically to lesbian sex. In production she limits and controls the gaze, which is not male, not female, but lesbian. To render this position theatrically and stage it in concrete terms, Hughes is physically present during each performance. She stands house right between the performers and the spectators looking into the picture frame of her own production. She wears a green, sixties style, cocktail dress that echoes the costume of her leading lady, Lady Dick. Standing in costume,
Hughes intently watches the play like the baseball coach who wears the uniform of a player. She occasionally mouths lines from the play silently along with the actors. Hughes is linked early to the dick character who makes her first appearance in a strapless, green cocktail dress that is similar to the one Hughes wears. As Hughes watches, the lady puts on each piece of the dick costume—shirt, pants, shoes, tie, jacket, and hat—over the green dress. Hughes’s presence, in costume, is visual reminder that the lady’s costume is hidden just beneath the dick garb throughout the performance.

The action of Lady Dick consists of a series of vignettes set in a sleepy, no-name, lesbian bar. Near the end of the performance, Hughes steps into the theatrical frame to perform a monologue entitled, “Lethal Weapon.” Until this point in the performance, the fourth-wall convention is maintained. When characters address the audience directly it is as if the spectators are present in the bar to watch a show being performed for them in that context. Until Hughes enters the action of the play, the spectators are not directly addressed as people who have come to WOW to see Lady Dick.

In the act of entering her play, Hughes as author(ity) breaks the fourth-wall convention she established for the first part of the play, and manipulates the theatre’s representational apparatus directly. She begins by slamming shut the door of the room/loft that contains both the performers and the spectators. She looks directly, and sinisterly, at the audience as she mimes locking everyone in the room with her and swallowing the key. She then turns maniacally on the actors. They appear from backstage, out of character, as she calls them onto the stage. She insists that they sit on the bar stools, cooing to them as if they are mindless puppets with no will of their own. She begins an aggressive, lengthy tirade that she performs at a barely contained, frenzied pitch as if she were attacking the actors, while the performers—ostensibly playing themselves—seem uncomfortable, afraid, and as if this event was not planned.

Hughes asks each actor questions like a playwright asking her characters to “speak to her”—recite back what the writer intends her to say. When the actor looks bewildered, Hughes whispers the line into her ear, pounds the bar wildly and screams “SAY IT” to the actor. When the actor quietly and flatly repeats the line back to the playwright, Hughes lolls back in ecstasy, reeling, as if orgasmically from the pleasure of hearing her words, her VOICE emanate from the representational frame. She talks of murdering people who get in her way while she circles the bar treating the actors as hostages, present to receive her abuse and perform her will. As Hughes reaches her most threatening pitch, Peggy Shaw, gets up, walks slowly downhill, and says quietly to the spectators nearest the stage, “Somebody get help. She’s not in the show. Call 911.”

In this moment, a performer, one who is party to the theatre’s means of representational production, breaks with the play’s action to implore a
THE LADY DICK

spectator to get help. (Spectators who hear her laugh.) By requesting that the spectator dial 911, the actor as representative of representation, calls on a higher authority—the law. The author has, so to speak, committed a crime against representation by stepping into her own play as a lethal weapon to representation's organizing principle and the conventions of theatrical production. She strips away her own characters and seemingly terrorizes her actors.

Of course the spectators are not fooled. They aren't meant to be. During the Lethal Weapon scene, one of the characters—a woman wearing a mini skirt—stands at the back of the stage space and to the side of the action around the bar—removed from it. A phallic electric guitar hangs around her neck but her arms are at her sides. The dick character is standing behind her, "his" arms around the woman, slowly, quietly, and continuously playing the guitar she wears. It's an image constructed to comment on how Hughes has positioned herself in the narrative. Hughes uses the apparatus of theatrical representation to scramble it, to insist that her desire drive its mechanisms, that her voice be constituted as subject of the discourse she generates.

She storms out of the room slamming the door behind her and as the performance continues, she reenters and retakes her place to watch it. This rupture, this lapse, or literal gap, this insistence played out in the context of sexual similarity and lesbian desire, foregrounds the possibility of a small
tend—a coming apart at the seams of representation—and suggests the beginnings of a solution to what feminist scholars have described as the crisis in representation.

Ironically, in the very specificity of Hughes’s lesbian drama, performed in the specifically lesbian context of WOW cafe, and designed for a specifically lesbian spectator, Lady Dick may have more subversive potential for all women than feminist performance designed “in general” to reach us all. Perhaps performance by its very nature has more subversive potential than other venues precisely because the spectator is unable to stop and reread one of its moment. In this sense her perceptions are more easily manipulated and learned conventions can be smashed up against her new imagery and relationships in a time sequence that allows little room for reflection.

In Lady Dick the spectator runs up against coded material that has been shaped or determined by a shift in desire that generates a new symbolism and imagistic vocabulary that demands an alteration of certain reading conventions. The significance of Lady Dick and the new lesbian theatre it represents, lies in its RE-VISIONING of popular culture and popular performance. It speaks to a much larger audience despite, or perhaps because of, its highly specialized configuration and, in part, because it is just so funny.

The text of Lady Dick begins with the following lines:

“Down these mean streets a man must go...” a man who is a woman in man’s clothing, a woman who is half Clint Eastwood and half Angela Davis, a woman with a tendency to splicce up her poetry with a few dick jokes, a woman who has fought and clawed her way to the bottom, a woman who likes having a mystery around more than she likes solving them. The woman is Garnet McClint, Lady Dick.

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