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Liminal Acts:
A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory

review by Jondi Keane

Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory
Susan Broadhurst
Cassell, London and New York: 1999
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Many practitioners have reached a level of awareness where liminality may be used to deliberately organise their understanding and interaction with the world. Susan Broadhurst's book takes advantage of the rising tide of interest in liminal studies to emphasise the importance of taking the body seriously in contemporary practice and the spaces which have been a direct result of this seriousness. Her insight addresses the current situation where, she suggests, theory is unable to sufficiently deal with the corporeal and consequently neglects a rich source of research, discovery and meaning. She positions her inquiry such that the liminal becomes a form of resistance as well as an approach to both art and theory.

The objectives of the book are to articulate the context in which liminality operates and the advantages that noticing liminal concerns may produce. Specific discussions include

- the relation of the liminal to the unpresentable
- the adjustment that theory, influenced by the linguistic turn, must make to include 'intersemotic' activities as an important part of current discourse
- that liminal acts and interests resist thematic closure
- the evocation of terms with other values such as 'excitement' or 'delight' to replace the 'beautiful'.

The structure and scope of her overview is ambitious and goes a long way towards forging a discursive practice that might function outside or across the domain of the arts and extend to social, cultural and political domains as well.

Much to Broadhurst's credit, she does not attempt to create a new genre for the practice of the liminal but establishes a way of looking at the vast quantities of interactions between bodies and information. She finds the liminal among already existing re-combinations of information and she unpacks quite adeptly the overlapping edges of contemporary creative work in the second half of the book. The practice of liminality consists of taking notice of the conditions of emergence due to the complexity of cultural sites.
The scope of the overview overburdens the investigation to produce a lineage and
pedigree and in doing so the liminal begins to appear as a thematic version of postmodern
aesthetics - something Broadhurst explicitly tries to avoid. Broadhurst is, however, after a
more subtle and more far-reaching critique that would influence the practice of theory
and art. And although the tone of this more precise investigation is present in the work,
she does not critically engage contemporary theory in search of the liminal, as she does
when dealing so successfully with creative works. In addition she chooses an already
accepted group of canonised theorists whose texts are dealt with as discursive rather than
liminal acts. The theory serves to rationalise and frame the emergence of the liminal and
in doing so seems like an exercise in legitimization.

As a result the book teeters perilously on being an example of her own criticism. In an
erly discussion Broadhurst laments the number of 'practitioners who become impossibly
complicit with the very ideas and structures they seek to deconstruct'. As a result her
choice of only well-established older male theorists and her use of their work as
foundational rather than liminal becomes suspect.

An oversight of Broadhurst's book is examining only the well-worn edges and leaving the
outer emergent edges of culture and practice unrecognised. All of the artists she uses as
examples are prominent players. It seems a shame not to articulate how fringe,
alternative and younger liminal scenes work into the fray. Another important issue that is
not addressed in the book but which the book raises is: How do we, collectively as a
culture and singularly as practitioners, make the transition from the practice of resistance
- that challenges the 'authorial forms of authority' and opens up liminal spaces - to a
practice that merges aesthetic concerns with the ethics of everyday life? 'Liminal works
confront, offend and unsettle', yet they must also reconnect and reconfigure. Perhaps this
is beyond the scope of a critical overview.

In conclusion the book seems to suffer from an atmospheric perspective. The weather
plays with the overview rendering the more current and closer creative works clearly and
fully while the theory appears at a farther remove, withdrawn from detailed scrutiny like
the horizon behind the haze. Although Broadhurst certainly does not need to install one
uniform perspective, the critical intensity and terms of engagement should fray the edges
of all practices towards their thresholds and not further alienate the subject of theory and
practice. The current interest in liminality points to culture that is increasingly aware of
its own abstract nature and has begun to recognise the real effects that these abstractions
have upon practical applications and embodied existence.

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