



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Review of James M. Harding 'Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminism and the American Avant-garde.'

### Citation for published version:

Taxidou, O 2011, 'Review of James M. Harding 'Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminism and the American Avant-garde.', *Modern Drama*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 103-6. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2011.0013>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1353/mdr.2011.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2011.0013)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Modern Drama

### Publisher Rights Statement:

© Taxidou, O. (2011). Review of James M. Harding 'Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminism and the American Avant-garde.' *Modern Drama*, 54(1), 103-6 doi: 10.1353/mdr.2011.0013

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



JAMES M. HARDING. *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists and the American Avant-Garde*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010. Pp. 222. (Hb)

*Reviewed by Olga Taxidou, University of Edinburgh*

This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of work in theatre history and performance theory that seeks to re-address the received histories of the avant-garde through a particular feminist re-visioning. In doing so it does not simply set out to supplement those histories by adding female names to the list of artists, but aspires to rethink the whole critical apparatus that has created this received history in the first place. Engaging with feminist performance theorists (Sue-Ellen Case, Charlotte Canning, Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan, Rebecca Schneider) but also with theorists of the theatrical avant-garde – Historical and otherwise – (Günter Berghaus, Paul Mann, RoseLee Goldberg, Arnold Aronson) the analysis that Harding's book proposes is “intended as a provocation” (7) and utilising the rhetoric of the avant-garde manifesto itself, he is “interested in pressing hard” and “overturning”(7) the blinding patriarchal assumptions that he claims have created this received history of the avant-garde. “With regard to questions of gender, studies of the vanguard have decisively remained in the rearguard” (8), is the accusation he loudly voices and repeats in various configurations throughout the book. Through a series of meticulous and insightful readings of feminist performance events (and lives?) by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Gertrude Stein, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneeman and Valerie Solanas a feminist avant-garde historiography is sketched out; one that engages thematically and contextually with the aforementioned events, but also significantly points towards the a series of “precepts” for a feminist historiography of avant-garde performance in general. Somewhat schematically put (by this reader) these are: the identification of an anticapitalist with an antipatriarchal aesthetic and trope; a radical

theatricality linked with the “risk-laden economies of sexual politics and gender construction” (31); a heightening of the aesthetics of collage while simultaneously disrupting the aura of neutrality and immediacy that often accompanies the critical assumptions about “*found sounds, found behaviours, and found actions*” (31); a nuanced inflection of Michael Kirby’s non-matrixed performance creates the notion of the *sub-matrixed* performance where the departure from conventional text-based theatre is also and always informed by “*the always already ideologically mediated social contexts of performance itself – and here that mediation refers specifically to the regulation of gender, sexuality and race*” (32-3). The final precept for a feminist historiography locates the book itself within the utopian aspirations of all avant-gardes, and that is its “*deliberate liminality*”, what Valerie Solanas terms in her *SCUM Manifesto*, its outlaw status. From the wanderings-performances through the streets of New York by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, ‘the mother of Dada itself’ to the bullet shot fired against Andy Warhol by Valerie Solanas, this historiography proves to be fraught and messy, where the personal and the politics of the everyday fuse with the experimental formal imperatives of the works discussed. Indeed, this is seen as crucial in undermining the workings of the repressive patriarchy, in creating historical precedents for feminist performance and in helping to sketch out a methodology that doesn’t simply add to a received history but asks us to look at it again. In doing so, however, and in stressing its polemical dimension, the analysis itself overlooks some of its own historical precedents: the link between patriarchy and capitalism is long established and well documented in the materialist feminist tradition (from the classic works of Marxist theory to experiments of the Historical Avant-garde, where the ‘woman question’ is central both to its politics and aesthetics); equally the aesthetics of collage and the various ways it conceptualises the

everyday, the ephemeral, the political etc. has been a constant feature in all the debates within early modernism, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism. What this analysis brings to these debates through the nuanced and well-documented readings of these performance events is the fervour and passion of the politics of visibility, presence and identity. While the approach bypasses explaining what is specifically 'American' about these events (in contrast to the primarily European avant-garde), it is distinctively American in its fusion of identity politics and performance theory. And if there is a distinct methodology that challenges the historiography of the avant-garde, I would claim, it is to be found in this heady fusion. At its best this rhetoric is impassioned and convincing but at its worst it dissolves into the politics of blame (established historians of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger and Günter Berghaus, become the obvious targets – ironically Berghaus in a recent conference at the University of Ghent, made a similar plea for the visibility of female avant-garde performers) where the 'declaration' of one's one sexuality – usually in the introduction – becomes a pre-requisite (call me old-fashioned but I won't oblige here). Of course, there is no denying that 'the personal is political' is a slogan that itself carries a lot of history and occupies a privileged position within feminist performance, but to paraphrase Adorno's comment about modernism, this is not always 'a positive slogan' (Adorno, 30). Real history rarely features in this analysis (the post-war settlements that precipitated the shift from the European metropolitan centres to New York, the establishment of the New York performance art scene *and* performance studies as a discipline, the Cold War, the politics of funding) as it is all overshadowed by the workings of the patriarchy. In a book where the word 'cut' features so prominently, one would expect a more detailed reading of the relationships between trauma, theatre, spectacle and violence particularly as they are often enacted on the female

body in performance (Harding cites Rebecca Schneider's work on the body as stage but fails to engage further with some of her insights). While *Cutting Performances*, highlights the works of these female performance artists within the canon of the avant-garde (some like Gertrude Stein and Carolee Schneeman already occupy a privileged position), the choice of artists themselves merits more scrutiny, together with their proclaimed 'Americanness' (Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, again proves an attractive subject here, as she returned to Germany as, indeed, for this reader would be the work of Marina Abramović, in enacting the fraught relationships between the European and American avant-gardes). However, any specific choice of performance events will always be open to scrutiny, and the choices presented here by Harding in an eloquent and convincing manner place the work of these women artists in the centre of the history of the American avant-garde, while asking us to look again at that history itself.

#### *Works Cited*

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Trans. C. Lenhardt. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.