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CROSS ERIKA MUNK LEFT

*A Few Notes on
Experiment Under
Reagan, Occasioned
by Anne Bogart
and Karen Finley*

One thing the cutting edge doesn't do is make the body politic bleed. The question is why. I never was too sure what the phrase meant—my fancy conjured the teeth on some horrible buzz saw of high-tech culture eating into city life—but the cutting edge seems to be what we now have where we used to have the avant-garde. All those critics, arts journalists, and cultural theorists who say that the avant-garde no longer exists are clearly right; so are those among us who see that at least in theater there's still a deep difference between uptown and downtown, mainstream and fringe, established and new.

But there's something wrong or at least unsatisfying about this difference, no hope in it. Bohemians, radicals, and

their cheap, scruffy neighborhoods have practically disappeared; new forms and forbidden subjects are almost instantly chomped up by the corporate maw and spat out as media or fashion. You've heard this before, it's the commonest gripe around. The external forces that have led to this situation are just as well-worked-over: reactionary politics, gentrification, TV-induced idiocy, etc. I'm wondering, however, whether these pressures explain enough.

For a while, we had alternative theater, which, more modest than the avant-garde, saw itself existing side by side with mainstream art instead of marching ahead of it. Noncommercial, antinaturalistic, collaborative, and tending toward the left, alternative theater presupposed an alternative audience with alternative values: an audience in some sort of political and personal opposition to things as they are. About six years ago this definition became inoperative, at least in Manhattan. There are still fairly large groups of people opposed to the status quo, maybe more and more every minute, but for obvious race and class reasons they include few of the people buying and seeing art. For those people, the notion of the cutting edge was invented: the sharpest, newest phenomena in the one big culture which anguishes us all, a fiction which provides neither the discipline of an avant-garde nor the discipline of an alternative.

In theater, this line is marked by those who pretend to be avant-garde and to be political, and who claim that a...

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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 lels in importance the original script itself and exists in constant dialogue with it. Last week a press release arrived claiming that Anne Bogart had found a new "concept" for Büchner's *Danton's Death*, and was using it in her production at NYU. Bogart is well-known downtown; the play is unshakably great and forever contemporary. I wouldn't want to review student performances, so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to look at the concept of "concept," stripped of its execution.

Bogart's idea was to have the play take place in a Lower East Side club, its characters impersonated by the patrons; in the cast list you get "Mary Sawyer as Madelaine Pood'ntaine [poontang?] as Robespierre," and so on. The club characters are stereotypes—guys with weird haircuts, glitzy-swishy gays, sluts in black—and they don't change much when they become Danton, Saint-Just, or the poor of Paris. My guess is that we're supposed to see how contemporary kids would understand and recreate this play—which itself was written by a 21-year-old only 40 years after the events it describes. A good old-fashionedly Pirandellian idea, full of political possibilities: do they think of themselves as weary of revolution, yearning for pleasure, under sentence by puritans, betrayed by social change, cynical about the poor?

We don't find out. Instead, we are handed Bogart's "concept" of what's contemporary. Some devices are familiar from her other work—a narrator reads all the stage directions, which the actors disregard while proclaiming most of the speeches in a rapid monotone straight out to the audience; the performers freeze in fashion-mag poses, fixing us with blank, aggressive stares; sometimes they move and chant in a choral clump, like a multipedic monster. The noise level is excruciatingly high, and there is an extraordinary

amount of running, jumping, and thumping about. The Fauré *Requiem* alternates with rock. Words here and there are pronounced in a French accent. Danton is bisexual (Marion being played by a man), all the Jacobin bad guys are played by women (Saint-Just



STEVEN RUBIN

Karen Finley changes venue

as a porn-mag dominatrix), Robespierre is not only female but a Southerner.

The details don't add up to a coherent or illuminating take on urban youth culture or on Büchner's play; what they reveal instead is a pandering, patronizing, and uncaring attitude toward the audience. Though crucial references go unexplained—like the weight of "September" on Danton's conscience—the interjection of readings from Büchner's letters and the constant presence of a narrator imply that we couldn't understand either the story or the characters unaided; and indeed the manic recitations, lack of interaction, and frantic stage business make comprehending

them hard. But the same rush, noise, and chic hypercool come from an assumption that unless the audience is constantly stimulated it won't have the patience or concentration to stay with the play at all. The spectator Bogart postulates has a tiny attention span, callused eardrums, zilch historical or literary knowledge, and not the slightest interest in the play. So she uses all the tricks she can muster, titillates, and simplifies. No awakening shock here, no collaborative enlightenment. The production is an ad which turns us into consumers of exactly the kind of culture by which we're already victimized.

I hadn't seen Karen Finley perform before I went to her recent show at the Kitchen. You may remember the Great Yam Controversy last summer, when C. Carr found our deepest longings described and darkest taboos violated in Finley's work, while Pete Hamill maintained the *Voice* political writers' high standards of philistinism by being absolutely sure that to write about her was ridiculous and to praise her lunacy, without having looked at her work, even on tape. Passions ran high. Too high, taking my expectations with them.

I thought I'd be faced with an extreme, flayed, almost unbearable consciousness: something I needed. What I saw was an interesting, quirky performer who walked on dangerous ground but rarely broke its surface. Moving about a stage lushly filled with working-class kitsch, Finley switched back and forth between two personae: a daily sort of self with a funny smallish voice, who explains that she's glad she's finished with the yam number because she has her period, talks about the death of Desi Arnaz, does little bits with bread, cigars, nail polish; and a trance self, the id to that ego—eyes closed, arms held out, voice suddenly resonant and oddly Southern—who chants of fuck, shit,

cum, of gang rape, child abuse, suicide. Some of this was startling and moving at first, but it kept coming back in the same tone, almost the same words—and the words were much the same as those Carr quoted six months ago. Set pieces. No matter how violent and obscene her language, and often beautiful her images, this setness robbed them of effect, and the audience sat like stones.

Of course the audience and how it sat were what made the difference between the Kitchen performance and Finley's work in the clubs. A 10- or 15- instead of 40-minute piece, late-night tension, everyone drunk, high, edgy, the dangerous possibility of really offending or arousing someone: a different story entirely. Why, when you come right down to it, were we seeing Finley in this unyielding, unresponsive space?

The question gets us back to the problem of the cutting edge. Finley's difficulty, like Bogart's, is centered in an idea of the audience, though the similarity ends there: She wants to connect, we want to connect, and it's the powerlessness of our artists and the rigidity of our arts subsidy system that prevent us. She clearly has toned her work down since the banning in England. That's much less important, however, than her change of venue. Performance artists can get grants these days. But the money is more and more tied to the institutions a performer works in; it's hard to find a foundation which will say, "Here, this'll pay food and rent for a year, just keep working." Without subsidy, an artist can play the clubs and get very broke and go crazy. With the kind of subsidy available, the work has to become respectable.

"I'm writing this right now, though I wrote the grant two years ago," said Finley early in the show. Of course it was funny, but in the long run the spectator loses, and once again defiance and enlightenment are sucked into what they oppose.