



Image Eaters

Big Art Group Brings the Noise

Jacob Gallagher-Ross

True to their name, Big Art Group's performances are big in every possible way: prismatic visuals hurtle across a panoply of screens, dazzling with flashing colors; strange conjunctions of video imagery captured live by a battery of cameras and spliced together in real time, ambush the eye; digital soundscapes thrum, groan, and roar at synesthesia-inducing volumes. You feel them while you hear them. Fusing the task-based precision and camera savvy of film actors with theatrical self-awareness and sly irony, the company's virtuosic performers race through texts and choreographies inspired by media culture's impossibly vast buffet of narratives, plotlines, character types, and gestural possibilities. They skip blithely from arch parody to pitch-perfect embodiment to fleeting moments of startling sincerity while performing for both the spectators in the auditorium and the omnipresent cameras surveilling the stage.

Figure 1. (above) Staging the chop-and-splice violence of film editing, the killer (David Commander) seizes one of his teenage victims (Amy Miley) in Flicker. P.S. 122, New York City, 2002. (Photo by Caden Manson)

Jacob Gallagher-Ross is a doctoral candidate in the dramaturgy and dramatic criticism program at the Yale School of Drama, where he twice won the John W. Gassner Memorial Prize for criticism. An associate editor of Theater, he has also written for TDR, TheatreForum, and Canadian Theatre Review. He is a regular contributor to the Village Voice's theatre section, and has worked as a dramaturg at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

In a Big Art Group piece, there is always too much to see, too much to hear, and too much information to synthesize. But this is very much the point: the company creates noisy art for noisy times. Their media-canny aesthetic acknowledges that contemporary life is itself a multi-media experience: lived across great distances narrowed by digital communication and a 24-hour news cycle; on parallel tracks enabled by the internet's diverse forms of secondary existence; and amid a deluge of images and fictional representations delivered by proliferating conduits—TV, web, film, advertising. And often to surprising places: a rudimentary smartphone takes pictures, surfs the web, and stores music—while also making calls. Nowadays, screens adorn the backseat of taxicabs, line the walls of restaurants, and are ubiquitous at any large rally or sporting event. Big Art Group's visual cacophony is a new form of realism for an image-drunk age.

The ensemble's theatrical ambitions are equally vast. They are not afraid to stage questions of the largest social and political import: In pieces like *Flicker* (2002), they ask how our culture's immersion in the language of cinema—our mental saturation with prefabricated narratives and sensational images, our well-tutored acquiescence to the chopping and splicing of film editing—have transformed perception and conceptions of self. *SOS*, from 2008, parses the emancipatory possibilities and the terrible alienating vacuums of America's ferociously avid consumer culture—modes of consumption that grow ever more intangible with each digital innovation.

In his essay "Publics and Counterpublics," Michael Warner argues that in our media-bombarded epoch, "Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Listen! Hey!" (2002:87). Attention itself has become a commodity: newsfeeds seeking to inform, pundits peddling influence, advertisements proffering pleasure, political statements borrowing slick gimmicks from Hollywood production values vie nonstop for the weary gaze of the 21st-century spectator. With so much data to sift through, so many images to scan, so many blandishments to resist or succumb to, what we choose to pay attention to and how we do so have become considerations of urgent political importance. Increasingly, modes of spectatorship constitute modes of political participation or dissent.

To stay with Warner's terminology for a moment, publics—those imaginary communities conjured by works of art or public discourse through their very modes of address—form and dissipate all around us, constantly proffering diverse forms of membership. By our manner of intake, we choose—even if the choice is frequently made automatically, with a negligent mouse-click or a distracted channel-change—whether we will be willing consumers or wary skeptics. We decide whether to belong to a public, or if we elect to see subversively, a counter-public. Big Art Group's experiments with attention and perception seize on this very conundrum, creating a new model for political theatre grounded in the contested dynamics of spectatorship.

Theatre artists keen to investigate the theatrical possibilities of technological image-making must inevitably contend with the wearisome grumbling issuing from critics who see the invasion of screens, electronic sounds, and pop culture materials as heralding theatre's surrender to predatory corporate interests and banal mass culture—relinquishing its supposedly sacral mission to present breathing bodies to a temporary community of other such bodies. But far from signaling the end of theatre's vitality, Big Art Group's innovations are renovating the art form for our media-baffled moment. Their theatrical methods are descended from Brecht: opening the apparatus of modern image-manufacturing to dissecting scrutiny, they take the discrepancies between live bodies onstage and their onscreen doppelgangers as a figure for media culture's many forms of transubstantiation. Not content with staging simple binaries—live or recorded, image or material presence—Big Art Group graphs a spectrum: bodies that crave the hi-def perfection of the video image; images that long to be ratified by eliciting sensuous responses in the viewer.

Technology performs in Big Art Group pieces—cameras reveal the limits of their sight, electronic soundscapes shake the room. Unhooked from recording devices, live-feed video



Figure 2. Performers Vivian Bang, Cary Curran, David Commander, and Jeff Randall create a composite body onscreen in *Shelf Life*. The Kraine Theatre, New York City, 2001. (Photo by Linsey Bostwick)

images become as ephemeral as the performances they simultaneously copy—churning across the screen, and disappearing into oblivion. But the company also performs technology: In Big Art’s Real Time Film pieces—*Shelf Life* (2001), *Flicker* (2002), *House of No More* (2004)—actors dash across the stage to imitate the blur of a camera-pan; turn into profile to shift lens angles; lean into the camera to zoom. Embodying these mechanical choreographies, the group stages the manifold ways technologies of representation deform the human figure—chopping bodies into chunks, reducing them to surfaces, suspending them, placeless, in virtual landscapes. The invisible work done by the well-schooled eye of the media-indoctrinated viewer emerges into plain sight—imaginative leaps in space and time become measurable physical zig-zaggings, adjustments of scale and depth require onstage contortions. The cognitive syncopation of testing images against an aggregating narrative becomes slippery, uncertain terrain as video feeds fall out of sync with their source material, or a visual shell game reveals its trickery. Their mediated stage contrasts the “slowness” of live performance—tied to stubbornly material bodies—with the speed and instantly framed finality of video; as Hans-Thies Lehmann has observed:

The electronic image [...] is pure foreground. It evokes a [...] superficially fulfilled kind of seeing. Since no aim or desire enters consciousness as the background of the image, there can be no lack. The electronic image *lacks lack* and is consequently only leading to—the next image, in which, again, nothing “disturbs” or prevents us from enjoying the plentitude of the image. (2006:171)

The theatrical image is always arriving (or disappearing)—it is never simply there, complete unto itself, like an image on a screen.

Beginnings

Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson—artistic and life partners—began working together informally in 1997, and founded Big Art Group in 1999. The duo remains the company’s creative nucleus—abetted by a rotating constellation of collaborators: actors, designers, musicians,

Big Art Group

All productions created by Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson. Date and location of premieres.

- 1999 *CLEARCUT, catastrophe!* The Kraine Theater, New York City.
- 2000 *The Balladeer*. The Kraine Theater, New York City.
- 2001 *Shelf Life*. The Kraine Theater, New York City.
- 2002 *Flicker*. P.S. 122, New York City.
- 2004 *House of No More*. P.S. 122, New York City.
- 2006 *Dead Set #2*. Hebbel Theater, Berlin, Germany.
- 2007 *Dead Set #3*. The Kitchen, New York City.
- 2007 *The Sleep*. Notte Bianca, Rome, Italy.
- 2007 *The People*. Inteatro Festival, Polverigi, Italy.
- 2008 *The Imitation*. Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin, Germany.
- 2008 *SOS*. Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, Austria.
- 2010 *Flesh Tone*. Work-in-progress, Abrons Arts Center, New York City.

and video artists. Roughly speaking, the division of artistic labor breaks down like this: the two envision the idea for a piece together, Nelson writes the company's scripts, and Manson directs. Manson's choreographies create the Group's stunning visual effects, and Nelson, a composer, frequently arranges the sounds. The pair's first performance experiment, created in 1997—before Big Art Group coalesced—suggests many of the themes they would go on to investigate on a larger scale. Lacking sufficient funds to stage a more conventional theatre project, or a space to rehearse it in, the two created a voice-mailbox, and recorded a series of monologues dealing with environmental themes—one was about the diluvial devastation wrought by China's Three Gorges Dam; another, arctic melt. Prospective auditors could dial in weekly and listen to a different performance each time. Combining the intimacy of telephonic speech with the anonymity and temporal dislocation imposed by the call-in format, the piece anticipates Big Art Group's penchant for apocalyptic narratives, its manipulations of mediated proximity and distance, and its jarring combinations of liveness and technological reproduction.

Although cameras and screens were not yet in evidence, with *CLEARCUT, catastrophe!*—the company's first piece for the theatre, which premiered at the 1999 New York Fringe Festival—Manson and Nelson were already experimenting with filmic material and performance vocabularies. A mash-up of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the Mayles Brothers's 1975 film documentary *Grey Gardens*—about the mother-daughter recluses “Big” and “Little” Edie Beale, living in hermetic seclusion on their once-grand estate, Grey Gardens, as it slowly rotted around them—*CLEARCUT* mingled Chekhov's stalled fictional lives, yearning for escape, with the genteel squalor of their real-life counterparts, the Beales. Incarnating this entropy, act by act the stage became more crowded with life-sized plaster cat statues. The actors—including celebrated downtown performance artist and drag icon Justin Bond as the Masha/Little Edie figure—couldn't help but trip over the effigies, littering the stage with capsized kitties. Manson describes the genesis of the piece this way:

I'd been looking at *Three Sisters* for a while, and Jemma took me to see *Grey Gardens*... I couldn't help but think about the similarities between the two stories, and so we asked the actors to watch the movie and take some notes, and to read the play and take some notes, knowing that they would play these combined characters, and then I gave them 15 minutes for each act to remember and reenact the whole thing. So even though we weren't using video yet, we were still working with a cinematic scenography.¹

1. All quotes attributed to Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson are from my interviews with them on 1 December 2009, and 29 March 2010.

The group's second piece, *The Balladeer* (2000), took this investigation of video-inspired performance techniques still further, staging not just narratives and characters derived from filmic



Figure 3. Rebecca Sumner Burgos, Justin Bond, Vivian Bang, and Laura Ritter in *CLEARCUT, catastrophe! The Kraine Theatre*, New York City, 1999. (Photo by Kim Gill)

sources, but the eccentricities of the medium itself: the wobbling frames of deteriorating videotape; the auditory jumble of a de-synchronized soundtrack. Put together during the time when the shootings in Columbine ignited paroxysms of hysteria about the effects of violent movies and video games on young minds, *The Balladeer* told a story about a high school prom using an acting style developed from video's quirks.

Facing forward, as though speaking into invisible, hovering cameras, the actors performed as if they were reenacting a (sometimes faulty) video recording—right down to tracking glitches and alienating moments of lost alignment between sound and image. During one sequence, a group bullying that turns into a brawl, the performers—clad in outlandish renditions of teen garb—vamp between melodramatic poses to the percussive accompaniment of video game-like electronic sounds (Swoosh! Pow!), shouting their lines (“Freak!”, “Fag!”) in the spaces between tableaux. Predicting the mediated violence of later pieces like *Flicker*, actors punch without touching or looking at each other; victims fall to the ground without acknowledging their assailants. Gathering speed, the stilted fracas resembles a videotape lurching on fast-forward. Nelson describes the eerie effect of embodying technology's vicissitudes:

Think of it like a kind of freeze-frame-like effect: the actors were going through the pieces as if they were on the videotape. You were already doing some kind of videotape language with them; there were actually no cameras and no video involved yet but there was still that idea.

Manson continues the thought:

Yeah, it was as if you could hear the audio of a videotape but the videotape was glitchy and you were jumping and...sometimes you'd hear the dialogue and see, you'd see the image and that was sort of the humor in that. It was salacious, really really dirty. And violent.

This interest in the nonsignifying “noise” of reproductive technologies—the pathos of corrupted data transmissions or kitschy camera angles; the visual clamor of multiple images competing for the gaze—carries over into more recent works like *House of No More* and *SOS*, a corollary to the Group's enactments of more purposeful cinematic techniques. This has proved to be a prescient line of enquiry: as technologies of reproduction and communication propagate, so too have their particular forms of noisiness metastasized in daily life. These days, quotidian consciousness is beset by beeps and hums, lived between diverse modes of electronic communication, multiple means of recording, and volleys of images.

In person, Manson and Nelson radiate a genial, infectious enthusiasm that belies the lacerating satire and apocalyptic tenor of much of their work. They frequently finish each other's sen-

tences—taking up and refining an idea, offering variations on a theme, or agreeing to disagree. Apart from their own theatrical endeavors, they're also avid spectators, keenly in tune with the international performance scene. When we met, they spoke with excitement about the offerings at the 2010 Under The Radar Festival in New York—making recommendations, eager to know what I was planning to see.

In 2001, Manson and Nelson began their experiments with what became the Group's Real Time Film techniques—buying a slew of video equipment at a New York electronics store with Manson's credit card, and testing it hurriedly in the six-day window between purchase and the deadline for returns. (The pair finds the assumption that they're technological magi—a conclusion you can't help but reach once you've been flabbergasted by some dazzling image in one of their pieces—amusing. Most of the gizmos they employ to create their startling effects are consumer-grade devices, readily available to anyone with the inclination to make intermedial performances.) The Real Time Film pieces—eventually there were three—consolidated the Group's earlier insights about media-derived performance in techniques at once disarmingly simple and startlingly theatrical. Manson recalls:



Figure 4. Amy Miley, Veronica Goode, and Vivian Bang in *The Balladeer*. *The Kraine Theatre*, New York City, 2000. (Photo by Caden Manson)

I just kinda had the idea of the live feed, and sewing the three images together: the live feed and the negative space and what we call the positive space, that is, the live capture on video. Positive space is the actor onstage being caught by the video, negative space is the actor onstage not being caught by the video, still onstage, but off-scene.

In the Real Time Film Trilogy—*Shelf Life*, *Flicker*, and *House of No More*—video cameras become passive participants, and performers do the moving around. The cameras are switched on at the beginning of a piece, and off at the end, and all the intervening effects are produced in the moment of performance. Editing becomes corporeal choreography; camera movements become embodied gesture. Video no longer simply stores recorded time, but partakes of theatrical ephemerality—the evanescent images that race across the company's screens are destined for disappearance, not archival preservation. This elegant inversion of usual filmic practice yields all kinds of revelatory conjunctions of screen image and onstage action. Technology becomes more “live” even as actors, embodying tropes culled from other media, become a little more “recorded.” *Flicker*, the middle of the Real Time triptych—which I discuss in detail below—demonstrates the metaphorical flexibility and theatrical power of these methods. It stages the usually elided violence inflicted upon the human body by the camera, making filmic editing into a figure for the ways in which ideology and media-ingrained viewing habits condition perception.

Even when the Group uses prerecorded elements—electronic sound effects, say, or projected graphics—they still manage to make such material share in the theatrical “now.” In performance, there's no production stage manager calling the cues—the actors and technicians take their prompts from agreed-upon visual and aural signals. Sound and video equipment are



Figure 5. *Real Time Film* techniques produce a living collage in *House of No More*. P.S. 122, New York City, 2004. From left: Ebony Hatchett, Amy Miley, and Mikeah Ernst Jennings. (Photo by Caden Manson)

played like musical instruments, foregrounding the physical act of pushing a button or flipping a switch—the whole arrangement calls to mind an orchestra without a conductor. Though the technology certainly exists to run their pieces entirely off computers, this automatism would be deeply antithetical to their artistic project.

The Group’s rehearsal methods are also aesthetically democratic. All the theatrical elements likely to appear in a piece—sound, projections, video devices, text, the performers themselves—are present in the room from the first day, and all are given equal weight during the composition process. A sequence can coalesce just as easily around an image or sound as a scripted action. During a performance, these elements are intended to be perpetually in dialogue with one another: Nelson talks about “an interplay of meaning and information,” whereby a video image or sound effect can either undercut or redouble the actions being staged by the performers. The revisions and recalibrations don’t end when a piece begins to tour; the notion of rehearsal underwrites the company’s artistic ethos. As Manson puts it:

When you come to see Big Art Group you’re not coming to see a play or a story, you’re coming to witness an action, the building of a space, and the act of doing it. It’s less about the play and more about the making of the play. It’s less about the image and more about the making of the image. It’s less about the text and more about the making of the text.

In recent projects, the Group has experimented with new variations on this idea of performance-as-rehearsal: during the development of *SOS*, in the spring of 2008, Manson and Nelson test-drove nascent sequences at the Brooklyn nightclub Glasslands, staging Happening-like mini-performances featuring the piece’s quartet of animal characters, clad in fuzzy theme park character-type costumes, gamboling around the dance floor. While touring the piece they’ve done similarly, hosting performance parties in local venues.

Failure and incompleteness are important aesthetic concepts for Manson and Nelson. Since there is always too much for the actors to do—constantly shifting between registers of performance and degrees of embodiment while remaining true to each piece’s complex choreography, their attention divided between performing for the cameras and for the spectators—failure

is practically guaranteed. Similarly, it's impossible for any spectator to see the whole of any piece—there are simply too many things to look at. But this is another aspect of their endeavor to turn mass media methods inside out. Flat, glossy perfection, an instantly and easily assimilable whole—these are the hallmarks of Hollywood and advertising.

Meanwhile, as the evolving Real Time Film techniques were extending the Group's artistic horizons, successful showings at New York's P.S. 122 were broadening their geographic reach. In 2001, after seeing *Shelf Life* at the Kraine Theater—a small East Village venue on East Fourth Street where Big Art was by now unofficially the company in residence—Mark Russell, then P.S. 122's artistic director, invited them to stage *Flicker* there. Joining forces with the redoubtable downtown doyenne Diane White—the former producer for innovative auteur Reza Abdoh, she has also worked with Richard Foreman and Richard Maxwell—the company quickly began to attract interest from overseas presenters, inaugurating a footloose phase in its career that continues to the present moment. Since *Shelf Life*, most Big Art Group pieces have been funded by, or tour extensively to, European theatres and festivals like Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer, Szene Salzburg, the Wiener Festwochen, and Paris's Festival d'Automne.

There's something deeply paradoxical about this aspect of the ensemble's career. Their themes, subject matter, and sensibility, are eminently American (or, rather, American as seen from the cultural island of New York City): reveling in mass culture's detritus, detailing the ravages of a febrile consumerism, the confusions of a spectacular society choked with representations. (As Manson pithily puts it, "New York is very noisy—and our work is very noisy.") But the economics of theatre-making dictate that they spend most of their time in Europe, visiting venues hungry for edgy (and especially edgy American) work. Though they maintain stateside residences, and are effusive fans of downtown NYC artists, they are also following in the footsteps of the itinerant group of expat American performance pioneers



Figure 6. Ned Stresen Reuter, Rebecca Sumner Burgos, Amy Miley, and Ebony Hatchett in *House Of No More*. P.S. 122, New York City, 2004. (Photo by Caden Manson)

that includes Meg Stuart, William Forsythe, and Robert Wilson. Like their downtown peers Richard Maxwell and, more recently, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, they find wider audiences for their work abroad, even as they continue to interrogate questions vital to American realities. In the globalized world of 21st-century performance, New York's progressive theatre art has become a commodity for export.

For that matter, Big Art Group has always been somewhat outside the downtown scene as well. The Kraine, where they did their early work, is now known as a venue that mostly produces stand-up comedy and ragtag semi-amateur theatre. Big Art then leapfrogged rapidly from P.S. 122 to the international festival circuit, bypassing New York's other experimental theatres altogether. Though they usually show new pieces in New York, these runs are often tantalizingly brief—*SOS* had a total of six performances in the spring of 2009. Unlike many downtown groups working today, they don't share performers or personnel with other ensembles or develop their pieces at the usual incubators like Soho Rep, the Ontological, or the Performing

Garage. Nor are they part of New York's gay theatre scene: although Manson describes the Group's perspective as queer, and their work frequently unsettles received images of gender, identity, and sexuality, they don't consider themselves a part of that group either. Manson notes amusedly that Big Art's work isn't seen as "gay enough."

Manifesto

When we met, I asked Manson and Nelson about their omnivorous approach to choosing source material. Their pieces draw on a dizzying array of cultural products, pulling images, language, gestures, and attitudes from movies, TV (fictional and "reality"), advertising, music videos, pornography, social networking websites—the list goes on and on. "I think one of the characteristics of our work from the beginning has been this idea of performative language," explains Nelson. "Performative language encompasses not just what's traditionally a play or playwright but cinematic history, televisual history, newer developments of languages of advertising—how do we appropriate all this? How do we synthesize it?"

What this list pointedly doesn't include, and hasn't since early pieces like *CLEARCUT*, is canonical dramatic texts; the duo is far more interested in theatricalizing media texts than mediatizing dramatic ones. Manson explains the urgency of the Group's artistic project:

The contemporary language is the image. We speak the image, everyone speaks the image—it's a global language, but a language that is mutating constantly and really fast. We're voracious image eaters—we're eating images all day long, we can't get enough. At the same time, people say these images are garbage and worthless, but actually they're really powerful—they move everyone. So when you have culture creators and advertisers feeding you these images, and at the same time saying, don't pay attention, it's garbage, throw it away, it's a very problematic scenario because then you're just willfully getting washed over and influenced. So a lot of our work is about this idea of how you're reflected back to yourself with these images.

Given that most of us have little control over the culture industry's menu, Manson and Nelson focus on the way this sensory glut is digested. Their pieces create microcosms of media culture's perceptual bombardments; overwhelming the audience with stimuli—forcing spectators to be selective samplers rather than passive absorbers—is an important part of the project. Nelson elaborates:

Traditionally, in our performances there's always the question for the audience: How are you assembling these things, deciding what is important, and what is not important? For some people, our plays are sometimes confusing or frustrating because there's a lot of things happening at the same time. They force the audience to make choices: What do you grip and what do you not? What do you pay attention to? How do you assemble a narrative? There's always an active dimension for the audience.

But even as their pieces dazzle with sensory plenitude, the Group also estrange, isolate, and deconstruct their own pictures—the constant visual dialogue between the material bodies of onstage performers and their subtly transformed likenesses onscreen creates a running commentary on the ontological differences between theatrical and media representations. The company is always unveiling its own tricks, showing how each image is made, theatricalizing the processes by which filmic sequences are constructed, interrupting implanted habits of seeing.

By way of encapsulating their artistic interest in the unseen aspects of media images—the marginal material edited away, the raw footage that becomes the retouched scene—Manson and Nelson tell a story about a stylist friend of theirs, who was working on a fashion shoot when a clearly strung-out model staggered in, late, to be photographed. She was grimy, scabby, unwashed and unshaven, with lank hair and a drug-addled affect. But the stylists and makeup artists got busy, and pretty soon the parts of the model that would be in the shot were look-

ing pretty good; the rest didn't matter. Manson gleefully describes the stark contrast between the finished product—airbrushed, digitally sharpened, ready for glossy paper—and the original subject: wan, sick, filthy. As a parable about aesthetics, the anecdote neatly summarizes the Group's approach to staging the strange alchemy that transforms bodies into images. If they had their way, you'd turn the page while reading the slick fashion magazine the abovementioned pictures turned up in, and suddenly be confronted with the actual undersides of those images: clothes carefully pinned around famished ribs; legs depilated only to the border of the camera lens; unpainted, pallid flesh; bruises, bags under the eyes, scabs and eczema. Nelson explains:

As we've developed the work, we've gotten deeper into the idea of the fissure, of the gap between what's being produced, and what the end result is, and the different layers of transmission that happen in between. We're not interested in communicating an illusion, we're always breaking it and bringing you out of it, and ourselves out of it, so there's this constant back and forth—disruptive techniques.

“The edit is a powerful tool,” avers Manson. The two see the mass media's smoke and mirrors, its anodyne exclusionisms, as analogous to the way ideology screens out bodies and identities deemed unacceptable by the blinkered mainstream. The Group's pieces use tools usually deployed to elide or homogenize such threatening differences to opposite ends. “We're trying to short-circuit the way we look at images,” Manson elaborates, “and trick ourselves into believing them.” He goes on:

Attached to that are gender identities and race identities. When a character in Real Time Film crosses the screen, it's flickering between male, female, trans, black, white, and Asian, and oftentimes it's vivisected, and put back together, and you have this monstrous identity up there where you have a black arm on an Asian woman—

Nelson cuts in: “When we say a monster, what we mean is something that is actually quite powerful and quite useful, identities that are able to cross many boundaries at once.”

Clearly, both Manson and Nelson are eloquent analysts of their own work, keen to place it in critical context. Their current side project, Contemporary Performance (<http://contemporaryperformance.com>), is an encyclopedic website about risk-taking international performance work, intended to serve as a virtual meeting place for artists and scholars. It features blurbs about a host of recent books—the cream of writing about contemporary performance—alongside its links to video clips and artist websites. The site's social networking platform allows for the possibility of border-crossing artistic collaborations and intellectual exchanges in the internet's intangible arena.

The duo is astonishingly prolific: besides their theatre work, in recent years they've also embarked on the serial film and performance project *The People*, which—transposing the Group's Real Time Film techniques onto real-world locations, transforming cities into film studios and town squares into screening rooms—will include installments incorporating local performers and landmarks from Polverigi, Italy; Halle, Germany; Salzburg, Austria; and San Francisco and New York in the US. They've created *The Sleep*—a rock opera blending live performers with two dimensional cardboard cutouts in ethereal projections on a translucent scrim—and numerous video installations, including one entitled *Cinema Fury* at New York's New Museum.

Manson and Nelson's ideas set the stage for two characteristic Big Art pieces: *Flicker*, the second installment in the Real Time Film Trilogy, in which cinematic techniques become figures for ideologically prompted perceptual “editing”; and *SOS*, Big Art's most recent full-scale theatre work, which had its New York premiere at the Kitchen in spring 2009. *SOS* continues *Flicker*'s performative critique of media-conditioned perception, placing the imbibing of pre-fab images amid the many insidious forms of glut propagated by America's rabid consumer society. (At the time of this writing, in February and March 2010, Manson and Nelson had just

begun work on a new piece, *Flesh Tone*—chronicling the return of a scarred soldier from carnage abroad to a decimated America—which had a work-in-progress showing at the Abrons Arts Center in New York City in April 2010.)

Flicker

Short-Circuiting the Audience

Flicker is organized around acts of cutting: filmic methods of flashing between shots, times, locations, and storylines, but also more bodily manifestations of the idea. The piece links the elective woundings of a masochist and the gruesome stabbings inflicted by a serial murderer with the manipulations of the film editor—and, above all, the editing done by the spectator's eye. *Flicker* interrogates modes of seeing inculcated by film and television, asking how these habits condition experience—using film's omissions and elisions as a figure for the ways in which ideology refracts perception.

The stage for *Flicker* insouciantly places screens before people, an instant visual metaphor for the piece's main subject: the blurring of the line between physical reality and mediated representation. In the foreground, a long, narrow three-part projection screen functions like a half-curtain—cutting the performers, who remain behind this barrier throughout the piece, off at the waist. (Like an extended medium close-up made flesh, we only ever see them torso-up.) A row of three video cameras mounted atop the screens interposes itself between actors and audience. Beyond the screens, beyond the cameras, the performers come and go across a shallow corridor of stage space, or rise from concealment behind the apparatus—hemmed in by technology. Even the live action is flattened into quasi-relief by screen-like restrictions.

Dialogue is mostly played directly into the constantly attentive cameras; scenes between actors are pieced together on the screens below. Even when the figures onscreen appear to be talking to each other, a quick glance back at the action behind the cameras confirms that they actually aren't—conversational relationships are frequently the product of choreographed real-time video editing, not onstage rapport. In the negative space between cameras—outside the area framed by each lens—shadowy supernumeraries appear and disappear from behind the screens to assist in composing a particular image or special effect: passing props or deliberately rudimentary homemade photographic backgrounds across the lens to establish place or extend an illusion of movement; suddenly leaping into the frame to stand in for another performer or take over a role.

Flicker thus takes place across two stages simultaneously: in the background, the tangible one where the raw theatrical material is performed—the unedited “takes” of each scene—and the filmic stage beneath, where the action congeals into a bewitchingly seamless whole. Spectators are free to let their eyes drift from the video images to the live performers above, and then back again. Seduced by the crisper pictures, rapid movements, and illusory intimacy of the video feed, the gaze automatically gravitates to the screens; it takes an act of will to remember to continually consult the corporeal source matter above. This “flickering” glance becomes another form of real-time editing, the core of the piece's meaning. Unlike the filmmaking process, where multiple takes and editorial splicings are carefully occluded in the final product, here we can see exactly what's being left out, sutured together, magnified, or elided, in order to create the seemingly cohesive images and narrative projected below. As the piece goes on, the omitted actions—the efforts of the busy extras active in the gaps between cameras, the empty stage spaces closed over—acquire an eerie force, the image of a repressed “real” stalking the filmed simulacra. The conventions of film storytelling are dramatized, becoming an intrinsic part of the stage action, giving new meaning to the idea of “cinematic realism.”

In *Flicker*'s opening sequence, we see a young girl from behind, running in place. She's fleeing a disembodied hand wielding a menacing blade that stabs up and down, *Psycho*-style, filling the foreground of the onscreen image—or is she trying frantically to escape the camera? As she looks over her shoulder to see if her assailant is gaining on her, an instant of doubt blooms



Figure 7. Two actors are sutured together onscreen into one screaming victim in *Flicker. P.S. 122*, New York City, 2002. From left: Jeff Randall, Cary Curran, Rebecca Summer Burgos. (Photo by Caden Manson)

for the spectator: this girl has awfully broad shoulders, and pants in suspiciously low tones. Is this girl a girl at all? But before these uncertainties can be resolved, the ambiguous figure suddenly replicates. Abruptly, two more identically costumed performers—also of indeterminate gender, though clad in the same aqua-colored blouse and brunette wig—rise up from behind the projection screens. The image of the terrified girl running from the hovering knife is passed between performers from left to right, simulating cinema’s panning gaze. As each performer leaves the space supervised by a camera, a successor steps into place and immediately takes up “her” breathless pace. Meanwhile, off-camera assistants—hidden by shadows—supply the hand and knife at each new location, slashing into the camera-frame. Onscreen, the “shot” looks unbroken as it roves from left to right and back; onstage, it has been pieced together from more than five different bodies. Now the sequence multiplies: suddenly all three doppelgangers are visible, onstage and onscreen, outpacing three separate knife-blades.

The image of human beings in flight before the camera—eluding the lens that seeks to transform them into images—recurs throughout the piece (as do the deliberate confusions of gender and performer identities, and the purposeful dissonances between the live action and its video double). The menacing blade and the deforming camera both commit violence upon the body—amputating aspects unacceptable to the wielder, or the eye.

Abruptly, assistants hold two placards before the cameras, their images juxtaposed onscreen—one reads “fiction”; the other “non-fiction.” Suddenly, the two are smashed together, closing around the live feed image of the terrified teenager, once again embodied by a single actor—the new sign, marked by a jagged seam zigzagging down the middle, reads “Flicker.” This confusion of realms is *Flicker’s* central preoccupation: the desire for fictional narratives and mediated images to assume an immediacy and vitality that offers the vicarious tang of reality; the urge to make reality fit into the standardized categories proffered by pop culture’s ready-made narratives and ways of seeing. *Flicker’s* two-tier stage—divided between live-action

enactments of film and TV-derived plotlines, and onscreen versions whose sudden close-ups appear more immediately present than the actors behind—embodies this dialectic.

The piece splices together two narratives that, on the surface, seem to fall neatly on either side of the fictional divide: one is “realistic,” and domestic, a study in psychological ambiguities and unfathomable human depths; the other is a trashy straight-to-video horror-movie scenario—stalkings and slayings in a creepy wilderness. But as *Flicker* flits back and forth between these stories—faster and faster as the piece acquires velocity—they begin to echo each other in unnerving ways.

Staged mostly in “interiors”—a lamp ostentatiously tucked into the edge of the video frame, and lighting in vaguely kitschy earth tones, like a 1970s rec room, suggest the inside of an apartment—*Flicker*’s first plotline is about the erotic dynamics of looking. Jeff, a pathological voyeur, video camera constantly in hand, can’t resist the compulsion to see the world through a lens. Justin, the puppyish roommate of Jeff’s ex-girlfriend Rebecca (the soap opera-ish plot entanglements are deliberate), is driven to make a spectacle of himself, staging personal pageants of self-harm: taking pills, looking for partners willing to cut or bruise him. He’s damaged goods seeking to get more damaged. When the piece opens, he’s discussing a recent suicide attempt, preening for the camera: “I guess that I’ve always just liked attention,” he confesses to Jeff’s avid lens. It’s a match made in fetishistic heaven, and the two embark on a symbiotic romance of seeing and being seen—subject and object united in the desire to translate Justin’s wounded body into images. But soon, Justin and Jeff’s story begins to take on teasing similarities to the serial killer horror show of the piece’s second plot.

These sections present a classic slasher-flick setup—its contours instantly recognizable from a thousand B-movie iterations (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the exploits of Freddy and Jason, *The Blair Witch Project*—the litany stretches into bloody infinity). We follow a coterie of horny, stupid teenagers as they get lost in the woods on the way to a fun party. True to cliché, they grope each other, squeal with moronic fright, and wander in circles—the acting here is pure parody, all wide eyes and valley-girl inflections. Gradually, all but a lone survivor are progressively culled from the herd and butchered, one by one, in inventively gory ways, by a lurking apparition in a balaclava. The “forest” is roughed in with deliberately tatty means: poster-sized backdrops blazoned with photographs of trees are held before the cameras to establish the outdoor locale; as the fearful teens pick up their pace, off-camera helpers wave the cards to create a slipshod illusion of motion. The killer’s handiwork is accomplished with equally low-tech tricks: In one joltingly funny moment a blood-daubed Barbie doll is dropped across the camera lens to simulate a mutilated corpse plummeting down from a tree; a gruesome decapitation is achieved by tossing a still photograph of the actor’s head through the frame, as he falls out of sight.

Getting lost in the wilderness is a recurring motif in the Group’s work—it pops up again in *SOS*—an impulse at once pastoral and panicked. These landscapes stand in both for the alienation of contemporary experience—we live amid a forest of technologies of mediation, surrounded by overgrown thickets of representations—and the frightening Other of all this abstraction, the natural world to which we have lost any meaningful connection, reducing it to sentimental clichés or nightmare landscapes.

In an eerie counterpoint to Jeff’s photographic proclivities, each of the stalking serial killer’s outrageously bloody and outlandishly staged slayings is capped by a crime-scene photo in stark black and white. (At one point, Jeff stages similar pictures of Justin lying corpse-like in the woods—the performer playing Jeff leans into the camera, and we suddenly seem to be seeing the scene from above; Justin stands as if posed lying down.) Photographic representation—ripping a living moment out of time, sealing it within a frame, peeling away its surround, transmuting bodily dimensionality to pure surface—becomes synonymous with violence. Like murder, it freezes the victim’s body in a final immutable state and treats that body as an object to be manipulated. In the sequences where Justin poses for Jeff—in one memorable moment Jeff’s gaze and our own are discomfitingly aligned as Justin, undressing, throws a provocative glance

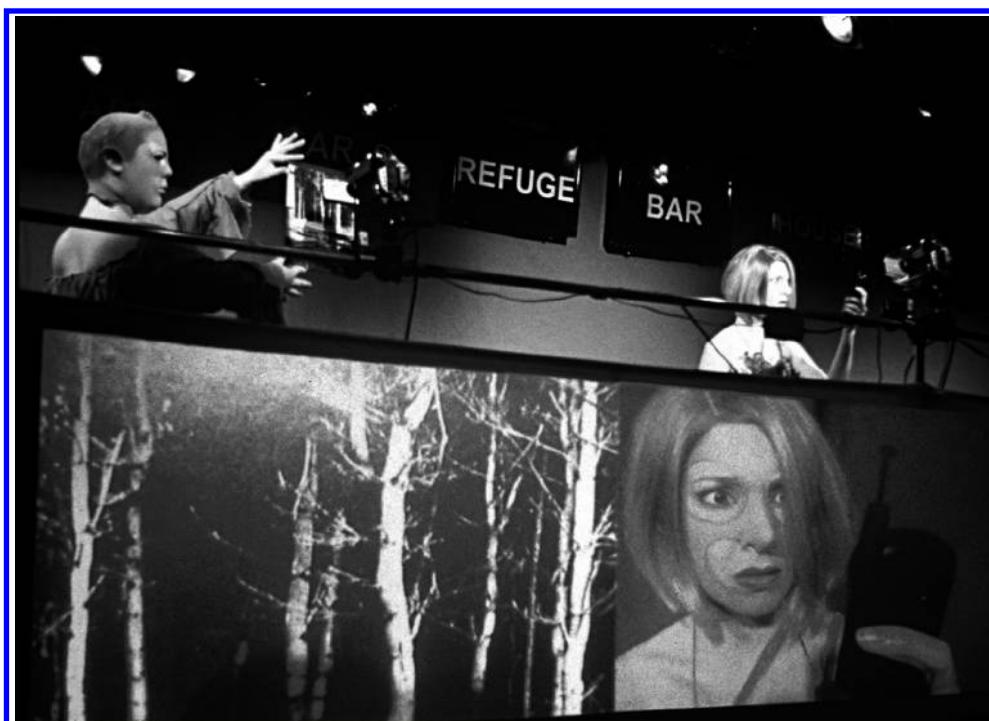


Figure 8. Performers David Commander and Amy Miley compose the onscreen image of a teenager lost in the woods in *Flicker*. P.S. 122, New York City, 2002. (Photo by Linsey Bostwick)

over his shoulder—spectators are continually reminded of their own voyeurism: we too are objectifying the complicit Justin. (“You’d probably film a junkie shooting up,” Rebecca snaps at Jeff at one point, accusingly. The equable reply: “Already have.”)

Parsing *Flicker*’s representational hierarchy (or pointed lack thereof) induces vertigo: the performers enact scenarios based on ubiquitous movie tropes, which are then captured by the hungry eye of the cameras and translated back into filmic scenes. The situations onstage arrive conditioned by images, expectations, and conventions derived from television and film, and vanish again into video sequences pieced together in real time. What is the copy and what is the original; what is the source material and what is the recorded reproduction—these are permanently unsettled questions throughout the piece. Every image onstage is being refracted by both the technology itself, and deep perceptual expectations ingrained by long exposure to mediated narratives. Midway through the piece, Manson eloquently encapsulates this *mise en abyme* in a single image: the performer playing Jeff turns the lens of his handheld video camera on one of the stationary cameras surveilling the stage, creating an infinite regress of mediated perspectives: through a camera, we see him looking through the camera at us; we watch him watch the camera that watches him.

Flicker works through syncopation—its two narratives are more or less linear, progressing straightforwardly through Justin and Jeff’s mounting emotional entanglement and the killer’s remorseless splatter-house antics in the woods. But the exchange between the live-feed video and the onstage action continually second-guesses the plotlines, forcing spectators’ attention back onto the construction of the video images—the disparities between the screens and the performances behind. What seemed like predictable narrative patterns suddenly lurch into incompleteness.

The onscreen “movie” sequences themselves frequently play perceptual tricks. By conjoining images from three different degrees of focus, Manson creates discombobulating motile assemblages: the killer looms into sight as a giant, snarling, balaclava-swathed head conjoined to tiny limbs; a humungous knife blade seems to skewer a hapless teen’s head—traveling through his screaming mouth, emerging dripping with homemade gore. The eye reels as the spectator tries to make these mismatched pictures cohere.

The company, through intricate choreography and careful timing, creates living collages in the video feed. (For most of the piece, it’s hard to tell how many performers are actually involved—they keep switching roles, and when operating “offstage” between the cameras, are usually cloaked in shadow, keeping an eye on backstage monitors to make sure they aren’t visible onscreen.) Sometimes, two actors are violently merged into a single image. During one of the serial killer’s murders, the bodies of two half-naked screaming women are sewed into one listing, cubist picture onscreen. The stabbing blade cuts along the seam between screens, where the line between the two bodies blurs—careful editing, like careless murder, erases the differences between human beings, transforming them into compositional material. At other times, the splicing is more subtle, joining one performer’s arm to another’s body onscreen, such that the composite figure combines genders or races—a woman’s arm on a man’s body; a brown limb on a white performer.

These stunning effects create metaphors for the intimacy and proximity simultaneously proffered and denied by filmic representation. Onscreen, performers appear to be touching when, in actuality, they are divided by the stage’s breadth. Actors caress with borrowed limbs, wield objects with alienated hands—just as a camera close-up pushes the fullness of a human figure further away, even as it promises to bring that person closer. In a clever acknowledgment of this visual conundrum, during many sequences the actors wear thin masks made from sheer nylon pantyhose; from a distance, off-camera, the flesh-colored fabric is imperceptible, but in onscreen close-up, the masks stand out sharply, obscuring the actors’ features, reducing each face to an anonymous blur. This additional layer of disguising is not apparent until late in the piece, prompting the discomfiting question: Have the actors been thus concealed throughout? The tantalizing closeness offered by the camera, Manson implies, is simply one more form of concealment. Similarly, all the props and costume pieces that signal character—we recognize Justin by his Andy Warhol-ish blonde wig; the teens by their tussled mops and trash-glam wardrobes—supercede the performers beneath. In *Flicker*, identities are temporary containers.

Only once in the piece do two performers actually touch, and this moment of seeming corporeal connection is also touched with violence. Late in the action, Jeff steps into the shower—roughed in by passing a crinkled plastic shower curtain across the cameras—with Justin. The two actors, framed for the first time by the same camera, tentatively, tenderly, make physical contact—but only after Jeff cuts a long bleeding welt across Justin’s chest with a razor blade. Onscreen, in extreme close-up—fleshy limbs becoming abstract landscapes—we see a hand holding a razor, inscribing a dripping red line down an arm; a photo of blood running down a drain is dropped in front of the camera to create instant montage. Jeff has moved from manipulating Justin’s figure on camera to tangibly editing his body; the sequence juxtaposes the extreme alienation of disembodied video images—appendages without their owners—with *Flicker*’s only moments of unmediated body-to-body touching. (By arranging to be gashed in this way, Justin is also making tangible the ambient violence society visits on queer bodies—“edited” by myopic norms.)

Meanwhile, Justin evinces a desire to pass beyond the surface of his body to the biological seat of all affect. He speaks his wish that human beings could just cut themselves open, and make their beating hearts visible to one another, communicating without any form of intermediary representation—image, language, metaphor—at all. We are all the same at our innermost places—but to really prove it, you’d have to eviscerate yourself. At this moment, we realize that we too have been sharing Justin’s yearnings: the setup of the stage means that we are always try-

ing to penetrate the screens' slick surfaces to the real action behind, to see past the flat images to the dimensionality of material bodies always just out of reach.

Previously, frustrated by Jeff's aloofness, Justin visits Willy, a nurse with a penchant for inflicting harm. Willy wears rubber gloves and an apron, and proceeds, creepily, to lay plastic tarps around his apartment—we quickly acquire a sinking suspicion that Willy might himself be a serial killer, and Justin his intended victim. His domicile is literally a cutting-room floor: he proceeds to slice a nervous Justin with a rather large knife. But Justin isn't into it, and quickly flees. Before he does, though, the sequence provides another vivid video metaphor: as Willy waxes philosophical about the perishability of human deeds, identities, and bodies—"our reputation, our office, and our bodies" he quotes, sinisterly, from somewhere—a performer holds a static-filled video viewer up to the lens of one of the cameras. Below, the screens fill with a nullifying blizzard; the static becomes an image of absolute nothingness, the void that attends the moment when human consciousness stops recording the world and images stop drifting across the mind's eye. Unlike cameras, which can archive and transfer stored time, the human mind's accumulated library of experience dies with the body.

This sequence, in turn, recalls an earlier moment between Jeff and Justin. They're taking a drive together—the two performers face into the cameras as though riding in the front seat; the screens close the onstage distance between them to produce a classic "driving" shot. The plangent strains of Emmylou Harris singing "Wrecking Ball" play in the background ("My life's an open book / you read it on the radio"). Justin—in profile now, to simulate Jeff's driver's-eye view—mentions a documentary he saw on TV about Niagara Falls: the water's unceasing flow means that scientists will never be able to see what's underneath—it's too dangerous. These unknowable depths become a figure both for human consciousness—endless figments coursing above unfathomed recesses—and, again, for *Flicker's* two-tiered stage. The continuous eye-entrapping stream of video images playing across the foreground prevents us from fully grasping the performed action behind. Images are comfortingly open to the gaze, easy to possess in their totality; human interiors are murky, evasive.

The film theorist Jonathan Beller talks about the "work" we perceptual proletarians do in the cinema, performing outsourced tasks for the "attention economy" (2006:5): making the imaginative leaps implied by jump cuts; deducing depth psychology to inform the motives of filmic protagonists; emotionally identifying sufficiently with their travails to lend narratives cathartic force. He argues that in our moments of leisure, we are actually performing vital labor for the culture industry, giving its products value with our affective capacities and intellectual abilities. By making the perceptual leaps required to fulfill Hollywood's comfortable fables, we are also participating—emotionally, cognitively—in the conservative ideology they embody.



Figure 9. Justin is cut onscreen in *Flicker*. *P.S. 122*, New York City, 2002. From left: Justin Christopher, David Commander and Rebecca Summer Burgos. (Photo by Linsey Bostwick)

In one sequence, the performer playing Justin drifts from one on-camera zone to another—a performative panning shot. But after a disorienting second or two, you realize that a new actor is now playing the role, clad in an identical costume and blonde wig—and that actor is a woman! The first Justin is still speaking from an unlit stage position just out of the camera’s reach; the new Justin is mouthing the words. Our own desire to see the performers as identical, to preserve the alignment of voice and figure, to see the character of Justin as a continuous entity, has masked the switch. Accustomed to the skewed sensory stimuli of media (like film and television) that isolate sight from sound—recording visual and auditory elements apart then tracking them together—we have been seduced into seeing the lip-synching woman as the speaking man. Besides creating a theatrical equivalent for film’s fractured realities, the sequence exposes the eye’s desire to see comfortably familiar likenesses.

Such eye-trumping effects create moments of cognitive dissonance that expose the usually invisible political content of filmic perception. The picture of a nubile teenage girl fleeing a killer in the woods—combining licentious desire with its punishment—is deeply inscribed on any spectator’s brain from years of film viewing, a pervasive archetype without particular origin. (Who can say where one first encounters such a sequence: illicit childhood video rentals? late night TV?) Thus, the initial visual impulse, when confronted with Manson’s bait-and-switch staging—two actors alternately playing the same girl, switching off without warning—is to see the substituted performers as identical. After all, each wears the same teenage-tramp clothes, the same wig, and runs and screams with the same comically frenzied cadences. The deep-rooted cliché, imbibed from countless film viewings, kicks in. But then doubt detonates: you realize one of the performers is actually a man, and an African American man at that, and, for an instant, perception turns back on itself. The eye and the brain undergo startled re-adjustment—we have just “edited” out all kinds of visual information so as to make the sequence continuous. In our desire to see an unbroken shot we have elided differences of gender and race in favor of filmic commonplaces.

The implications of these moments of recognition are ambivalent—on the one hand, the video images seem to create virtual bodies that transcend racial and gender differences, beautiful monsters free from the constraints of prescribed representations (after all, if at first we didn’t notice the differences, maybe they’re not as essential as we think they are). In the radical democracy of the camera lens, before editorial intervention, all bodies are equal—technology sees in a more egalitarian way than we do. But this emancipatory view is countered by the abstraction and violence of the image-making process: bodies are being chopped up and promiscuously reassembled, Frankenstein-like, onscreen before us. Read this way, these sequences are deeply troubling, as an image of the eugenic prescriptions of media culture: all diversity, all difference is swallowed up and replaced by sanitized and prefabricated images. Media stereotypes are more durable than the individual bodies that we shoehorn into them.

None of these interpretations finally holds sway in the piece; the company’s techniques simply direct our attention to the ways in which our very gaze has been contaminated by media-implanted expectations. How much of daily life is unconsciously conditioned by B-movie narratives? The flicker, the instant of wavering in a seemingly coherent image is, for Big Art Group, a potentially liberating moment—a fleeting chance to examine the deep structure of perception, to see human beings briefly outpace the frame-making gaze of the camera.

In *Flicker*’s final sequence, its two stories—between which it has been skipping faster and faster—are suddenly, violently brought together. Two cars—one containing Jeff, Justin, and Rebecca, bickering about their interwoven resentments; the other carrying the last surviving teenagers, fleeing the carnage in the woods, with the killer stowed away in the backseat—careen into each other on a deserted stretch of highway. It’s the ultimate smash cut. As the cars hurtle out of control, the two groups of performers leap on and off camera to suggest frenzied climax-worthy filmic jumps between vehicles. But the crash itself is a moment out of time: The performers drift slowly, mournfully across the cameras, limned by soft light, arms gracefully outstretched as though waving goodbye.

Bodies and machinery are crushed together into an undifferentiated blur. To register the shocked aftermath, the actors, stage blood-daubed, wide-eyed, lean straight into the camera, creating brutally extreme onscreen close-ups. The video feed displays grotesque disjointed pictures: roving eyeballs, a fish-eyed face. Rebecca exclaims at the beauty of the stars overhead—a tiny flash of lyrical perception in the midst of mechanical devastation. The last time we see the characters, they are in this liminal zone: neither dead nor alive, neither whole nor in pieces (with the exception of the last, plucky teenager, who wriggles out of the wreck, and in triumphal slow motion, turns on the stalking murderer and gives him his just desserts by skewering him with his own knife—the horror movie genre’s warped version of poetic justice prevails).

All at once, this scene of woe is displaced by a startling vision: the entire company of actors, glimpsed all together for the first time, are now running towards the camera, all identically costumed like one of the woebegone teenagers. Suddenly the lights shift, and a warm amber glow turns the videoscreens below transparent; the performers stop moving, and for a fleeting, arresting moment, we finally see the vantage that has been refused us all through the piece: the human form, in its unaltered figural integrity, and diversity of possible shapes, in golden silhouette. For this tiny interval, no cameras block our gaze, no images drag its focus, and we are free to look on one thing only. But the lights are already dimming, the performers are vanishing into the dark, and this fugitive glimmer of wholeness is gone almost as soon as it appeared.

Subversive Seeing: SOS

When *SOS* premiered in New York in the spring of 2009, the shockwaves from the burst subprime mortgage bubble were still rippling outward, shaking every strata of American life.² The piece stages a theatrical double of the financial crisis: the semiotic bubble of the society of spectacles—a second meaning of the piece’s title, besides its plea for rescue—inflated to the very edge of exploding. *SOS* depicts a culture helplessly lost in media society’s uncanny valley, where representations replace experience, revolutionary gestures are co-opted as advertising strategies, and “realness” is the most artfully arranged illusion of all. Big Art Group suggests that, in addition to compounding fiduciary deficits, America also has a reality gap, an insatiable craving for ever-mounting levels of abstraction. *SOS* pushes America’s culture of pell-mell consumption into unstable overdrive, positing that rebirth is only possible through destruction.

While staging cutting caricatures of America’s material gluttony, the piece also anatomizes more intangible forms of consumption—the insatiate desire for blandly perfect images, and advertising’s wish-fulfilling fictions; the relationship of theatrical spectatorship to the indiscriminate imbibing of images we submit to elsewhere. The piece plays variations on the idea of emptiness: the gaping vacuums that compulsive consumption fills, the hollowness beneath the inviting surfaces of commodified images; but also the tantalizing possibility of new vistas of social possibility—the birth of something new and unnamable from the ruins of the old.

The set for *SOS* transforms the Kitchen’s black box auditorium into what looks like a transmission-ready television studio. Reversing *Flicker*’s floorplan, the screens loom behind the actors this time, dwarfing them in scale: the battery of surfaces—six vast blank rectangles, and two smaller monitors—crowds the stage. Downstage, a row of video cameras on tripods waits expectantly—as in *Flicker*, the cameras literally mediate between performers and audience, frustrating the gaze—surrounded by photo shoot paraphernalia: white light deflectors, neutral studio backdrops, and various props. Perspectival sightlines in fluorescent hues radiate outwards along the floor. In the foreground, video projectors hum faintly. At every moment in *SOS*, the screens broadcast visual superabundance: live-feed video multiplies the performers’ faces, transforming the stage into a leering hall of mirrors, or vivisects their bodies, isolating and enlarging staring eyes or gaping mouths. Psychedelic projections transform everyday consumer objects into nightmarish phantasmagoria. Jury-rigged footage teleports the actors into a

2. Parts of this section draw on my introduction to the published text of *SOS* in *Theater* (2010).



Figure 10. Willie Mullins, playing a member of the RLF, waits for his close-up in *SOS*. *Temps d'Image Festival*, Montreal, 2009. (Photo by Jemma Nelson)

range of adrenaline-laced media environments promiscuously grabbed from movies, TV, the news, and a myriad of other hard-to-place sources—car chases, shootouts, an earthquake, a burning building, a sinking ship. (The performers also visit more quotidian but equally hyperreal locations: a hair salon, a penthouse suite, a family car trip.) Periodically, the actors clear the stage for an overwhelming sound-and-light show that mingles advertising slogans with revolutionary political rhetoric in a nonstop newsfeed—strobing with eye-confounding speed in luminescent hues.

SOS flashes back and forth between three principal narratives, each concerned with the colonization—or even supplanting—of reality by commodified images. In the first, actors in

plush, pastel-colored animal suits—a wolf, a bear, a deer, a rabbit, and a raccoon—roam panicked through the forest, desperately attempting to find their way home. They look like escapees from an amusement park, the fixed grins on their furry headpieces contending with the performers' terrified expressions beneath. (They also bring to mind *Flicker's* condemned adolescents—wandering off civilization's grid into deadly peril.) The fuzzy costumes are fitted with tiny video cameras mounted on slim, flexible metallic arms jutting out from the animals' torsos—weird protrusions that beam jittery pseudo-documentary close-ups of the actors' fearful faces to the screens overhead. (Since *The Blair Witch Project*, this particular trick has become a cliché of cinematic “authenticity”—grainy footage, shaky frames, and flashlight illumination as tokens of faithfulness to reality, unseen horrors lurking in the dark zones untouched by the camera.)

As we quickly ascertain, these cutesy critters are denatured—utterly alienated from the animal kingdom. They've no clue how to survive in the wild; they've even forgotten what wilderness looks and smells like. Proclaiming their fear in cloying cartoonish voices, the beasties helplessly chase their own tails—they don't know how to locate water, can't imagine how they'll find food. They wander in circles, bitch, moan, and blame each other. The hapless furballs' plight is discomfitingly close to that of any American consumer—we buy plastic-shrouded produce in arid emporiums, often without knowing where it came from or who nurtured it. We pay with credit cards that record debt in the intangible ledgers of distant Web server farms. If the unthinkable happened, and the interlocking supply chains that buttress American life were broken—in other words, if we had to hunt and gather ourselves—most of us would undoubtedly starve.

DEER: Shut up! Just please shut up!

RABBIT: Don't tell me what to say! Don't tell me how to express myself! This forest, I hate it, I fucking hate it! I hate being here! I don't want to be here anymore!

WOLF: Well then break away! I know I want to!

RABBIT: It's so fucking hostile and it's making me mental! What kind of sense does it make—am I being soothed by this forest? Are these trees protecting me? NO! It's a place without purpose. If this place isn't gonna take care of me, then why the FUCK am I here?

DEER: If we could only get comfortable...goddamn these trees, there's so goddamn many of them!

RACCOON: We should welcome nature in, we are naturalistic too and naturistic also, we are not realistic, but we are actual. Would we actualize, would we realize our true nature, we would not divorce ourselves from the soil and the sour gas.

RABBIT: Look at this ugly thing. Shouldn't I be able to smell this? Why don't the plants here smell like anything?

WOLF: I can't smell it.
(2010:48)

With these pathologically anthropomorphized mammals, the company is also lampooning the always-urgent American compulsion to return to nature—a compensatory response to existences increasingly dissociated from it—by eating precisely sourced heirloom vegetables or venturing off-grid to live in a survivalist retreat. By rendering such urges as saccharine naïveté delivered by stuffed animals, *SOS* suggests that we can no longer conceive of nature as anything but a set of sentimental, commodified platitudes. Our culture has Disneyfied ecology, reduced it to cartoonish cuteness or ominous menace.



Figure 11. Wolf (Ned Stresen Reuter) and Deer (Willie Mullins) engage in predator-prey role-play in *SOS*. *The Kitchen*, New York City, 2009. (Photo by Caden Manson)

The thickets of reproductive technology onstage add another layer to the Group's wilderness metaphor. With personal cameras perpetually trained on themselves, the animals are lost amid their own likenesses—multiplied across the many screens into a grotesque self-portrait gallery. Confessing every hysterical feeling, the creatures are lost in a feedback loop of self-regard, each panicked moment amplified by its simultaneous onscreen magnification. In advanced-capitalist America's society of spectacles, the piece implies, we are all lost in a wilderness of images, getting ever further away from stable referents to ratify reality. That each animal is an ambulatory film studio, continuously documenting its own solipsistic dramas, suggests also the myriad of forms technology proffers to preserve and sanctify the details of quotidian life: Twitter feeds for passing thoughts; Facebook albums for party pictures; blogs for longer musings in the revelatory mode. By carefully curating their information—selecting like-minded websites and following friends' links—internet-era spectators can ensure that they never have to disagree with an opinion or have their prejudices challenged.

The situation rapidly deteriorates from bad to worse in this skewed state of nature: the Raccoon freezes to death; the Deer and the Wolf experiment with some S&M-inflected predator-prey role-playing, performing their food-chain identities for thrills—interspecies lust tinged with carnivorous appetite. Suddenly alone together onstage, the two creatures' biological drives become kinky fetishes: melting into an illicit embrace, running fingers through synthetic fur, Wolf caresses Deer along a scar left by a hunter's arrow. Deer coyly savors the softness of

Wolf's coat. As they neck—the performers' faces peeping out comically beneath their mashed-together masks—the moment acquires a dangerously ambivalent cast: will hunger remain sublimated into lust, or is the Deer about to get eaten?

Soon, the incongruous herd's paranoia reaches manic intensity: they collectively eviscerate the Rabbit in an improvised sacrificial ritual, hoping to receive numinous communications about the correct route home from the map of her spilled guts: "Tell us where to go, show us the way out of here!" shrieks the Deer while pawing through Rabbit's tangled intestines—ropey coils of red material that unspool luridly from beneath her furry costume as the other performers toss them like noodles. The grappling between creatures as they vie to lead the pack evokes the stark Darwinian food chain of American capitalism; the violent results of their groping for the sacred suggests the capacity of baffled minds to resolve uncertainty with brutal extremity.

In *SOS*'s second plotline, a cell of guerilla makeover artists and pirate TV broadcasters called the "Realness Liberation Front" (RLF) plot a global insurrection that is also a "reality situation infomercial thing" called "Realness ®"—this revolution will most certainly be televised (2010:49). Ready for their close-ups, the squad is garbed in immaculately trash-glamorous revolutionary chic, drag meets FARC: bandoliers, skin-tight camouflage vests, headbands, glossy makeup, flowing tresses. Working feverishly in their soundstage and ideological think-tank, the vamping commandos stage, in amphetamine-paced succession, a comprehensive litany of mass media simulacra, weird confluences of filmic genres, locales, and sensational special effects, as though trying to exhaust the entire repertoire of mass entertainment ("ARTIFICIAL REALITY LEADS TO GRAND CATAclysm" one of the soldiers proclaims). "FAMILY DRAMA KITCHEN SINK," or "ROMANTIC COMEDY HAIR SALON," announce the projected titles that introduce the satiric scenarios. In these scenes, the squad presents rough sketches of familiar media tropes—whining kids in the backseat on a family road trip; fending off sci-fi freaks in a post-apocalyptic wasteland—trusting Big Art Group's audience of pop culture connoisseurs to catch the references, and fill the gaps.

At drag balls, catwalk "realness" competitions assess a performer's ability to seamlessly mimic a straight persona—acting more hetero than the heteros, in a context that is anything but. The more uncannily verisimilar the performance looks, the more scrupulous artifice was required to construct it—and more subversive its import becomes, suggesting that all such personas are equally artificial, equally "made." In this light, straightness becomes the queerest performance imaginable.

The RLF's revolutionary project is a "realness" competition writ eschatologically huge: Arranging worn-out plots and tired genres, one against the other, *SOS* suggests that the mass media, considered together, have mapped out a nearly complete alternate universe, a total (and totalizing) work of art. American society has a filmic corollary, a ready-made comparison or pre-fabricated narrative, to give meaningful shape to any feeling, experience, or situation: love can follow patterns drawn by hundreds of romantic comedies; impending real-world environmental catastrophes have already been pictured in disaster movies galore; the plight of the starving in the less fortunate regions of the world has been pre-packaged for easy affective consumption by do-gooder Hollywood tear-jerking star vehicles. Spectators' instant, amused recognition of the variegated targets of Big Art Group's satire is itself a comment on how deeply infused we all are with these prefab models for life. The RLF's project implies that American culture has become a form of drag: performing an uncanny version of itself according to mass media scripts.

Meanwhile, these sequences point out that the very concept of revolution—artistic or social—has been so completely co-opted by commerce that even the most formerly incendiary piece of rhetoric or oppositional stance has probably already been used to hawk cars (Mercedes-Benz currently manufactures a dapper little roadster called the "Avantgarde"), and new consumer products promise to transform the purchaser's life and identity with the vocabulary of

radical social movements. Staging this very phenomenon, at several intervals in *SOS*, video projections of seditious political slogans and messianic injunctions grafted together with advertising-copy blandishments coruscate across the screens in lurid letters: “A RAGE BOILS IN THE BREAST OF THE EARTH”; “BRING EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO DESTROY”. The phrases flash by so inassimilably fast that the two discursive registers smear together—visually as well as rhetorically indistinguishable.

The Realness Liberation Front’s members call for transmogrifying upheaval in slang mottos that blend campy bitchiness (redolent of the dictatorial tastemakers on reality shows like *Project Runway*) with revolutionary fervor, millennialist yearnings, self-help psychobabble, and trendy pomo theoretical jargon. Their rhetoric provides another queasy reminder that omnivorous advanced capitalism is capable of devouring any oppositional stance. Camp, formerly a method of maintaining distance from consumerism by ironically celebrating its discarded detritus, has become mainstream, simply another way to enjoy the same pop culture junk—ratifying where it once critiqued. Postmodern theories—the philosophical extensions of transformative social movements into language, literature, and thought—have become salable stuff, decorating grant proposals, lending a patina of transgression to artist statements. Here’s a sample of the RLF’s hectic phrasemaking—conjoining tech-speak, transgressive sexuality, bent genders, and insurrectionary vim—as barked into the cameras by Addison-Avery-Alexis, the Front’s hectoring lieutenant:

Girls, girls, girls! We need more bodies, more recruits, social networking, virtual friends, we need willpower, and real power from the illusion of numbers, impressive totals, big figures that can’t be contravened. Proof positive that we are not a minority, but a spike with deadly sharpness that will pierce the rectum of the general population. NO MORE TIME FOR WORDS, WE WANT ACTION. We are going to throw a coup d’état, like you’ve never seen one before, a transformation to end all transformation! A massive, all revolution, a planetary-scale reassignment! The beginning of the NEW NOTHING! (2010:47)

Sandwiched between the baffled beasts and the primping paramilitaries, short interstitial passages called “Profiles” set two babbling uber-consumers against each other in a high-stakes coolness contest that pessimistically posits how profoundly the language and values of advertising and corporate culture have penetrated American life and speech. Consumerism has soaked down to the atomic level, permeated our DNA. Like a Facebook or Myspace page brought to life, here identity is reduced to a thin veneer of likes and dislikes, buying and viewing habits, posed pictures and brand awareness (even their names sound like IM handles or tech products: FIERCETWEEN4DAYS and LOOKSSERVERINTERFACE).

Working it for the cameras, the two shopaholics brandish enlarged cardboard cut-outs—brand-new, essential consumer products!—as live-capture video transports them into kaleidoscopic advertising landscapes onscreen, like shiny magazine spreads made animate. Hot dogs and hamburgers circle their heads in psychedelic orbits, ceding screen-space to halos of handguns, swatches of corporate graphics, and assorted other floating consumer debris. Nachos assume a hallucinatory vividness, vying for place with rotating handguns and cutout cows. Gleefully adrift in this confusion of commodities, the two preen, pout, and wink like good spokesmodels. Their breakneck dialogue—the pair never spoil their delirious communication by stopping to think—trades in deformed brand identities, and aspires to strange conjunctions of flesh and fashion. Here’s FIERCETWEEN4DAYS’s personal shopping list:

FIERCETWEEN4DAYS: I want designer high-fashion-ultra-luxury-label everything! I want all my cells in my body to be replaced by a fashion house mega-merger branded bone graft spinal plasma replacement designed by the new winner of USAmerica’s Next Top Project Super Runway Chef! I wanna have genetic therapy and my fancy parts expressed by



Figure 12. An addled shopaholic (Heather Littear) amidst hallucinatory advertising landscapes in *SOS. The Kitchen*, New York City, 2009. (Photo by Caden Manson)

genes from Dolce and Rihanna and melamine pigmentation by Chanel and hair pattern baldness in ringworm effect by Vidal Fructis and hangnail scurvy by L'Oreol and body hair doormats by Calvin Kors Ford for the House of Evil Saint Le Wrong. (2010:53)

For these two chatterboxes, being early to adopt the newest trend in consumption is to merge breathlessly with the ceaseless movement of capitalist exchange, to be in harmony with the protean zeitgeist. New products or mass media entertainments do not simply fulfill desires or serve experiences; they are the only means by which to create them. (The endless liquid movement of the trippy pictures onscreen—matched perfectly by the twists and turns of Nelson's always-mutating text—creates a constant visual reminder of capital's sleepless global circulation.)

In *Performing Consumers*, Maurya Wickstrom uses Michael Taussig's notion of the "really made up" to describe the process whereby consumers "embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories [...W]e loan the brand's character the phenomenological resources of our bodies. We play out its fictions, making them appear in three dimensions, as if they were real" (2006:2). She points out that "moving on a spectrum between the made up and the real is an important source of pleasure in postmodern culture. Our consumption practices are shaped by our theatrical ability to hold the real and the not real as a simultaneous instance of embodied experience, an ability to live the truth of our make believe" (2). *SOS's* performing consumers embody this dynamic as insatiable, enforced improvisation on roles dictated by consumer culture's constantly shifting script; to borrow Jon McKenzie's memorable formulation, they must "perform or else!" (2001).

The pair is so thoroughly pinioned to the consumerist grid, that the prospect of disconnecting from pop culture's closed circuits causes ontological hysteria. These logorrhheas wish to be swept away and sublimated into pure, bodiless representation, to have fashion and pop cul-

ture injected into their meat and bone. Suspended in a state of permanent, insatiable desire for each new lifestyle enhancement, they are lost in a history-less, context-less, continuous present. The perpetual displacing of the performers' presence—they are here standing before us, over there divided between several screens, their voices broadcasted everywhere by the theatre's wraparound sound apparatus—is actually another form of realism for a time when most people, whether by design or not, live life on parallel planes.

In one of Nelson's most brilliant satirical confections, you can't help but connect the RLF's pomo revolutionary demands for fluid gender identities, with the "Profiles" enforced self-performances—advanced capitalism's desire for perfectly malleable subjects dovetails with post-modern theory's emancipatory decenterings of identity. As in *Flicker*, the political implications of the race- and gender-transcending figures created onscreen are deeply ambivalent. Looked at one way, they are the perfect embodiment of the RLF's subversive project: sublimely artificial beings straddling every possible identity. But from another perspective, the amputated limbs and bizarrely enlarged facial features onscreen provide a potent visual metaphor for bodies maimed by capitalism's ever-shifting demands, legible proof of media culture's ability to commodify subversive identities as sexy branding tactics.

In one of *SOS*'s most eerily indelible scenes, the spontaneous filming of a music video—one of pop culture's most effective combinations of art and advertising—becomes an unsettling spectacle of de-materialization. The fleshly actor standing before us, fetchingly cross-clad in wind-rippled red dress and Marilyn-esque blonde curls, seems to evaporate into the flat perfection of the processed video image being projected above. As he croons seductively into the camera, undulating into pop-diva postures, his voice is digitally filtered, and harmonized with the pulsing electronic track beneath it. The tatty streamers being waved around his swaying body by off-camera assistants reappear onscreen as a rainbow swirl of delirious motion, while he intones apocalyptic sentiments in dance club anthem style:

Blackout takes it all
All your problems solved
Blackout Burnout Breakdown Change
Feel yourself so free
Kill yourself killing me Me
I disco.ne.e.ect, I disco.disco.ne.e.ect. (Nelson 2010:56)

Repurposing generic pop-culture throwaways, Manson finds lyricism in unlikely places: at one point, to stage the RLF speeding off towards the unknown, he projects a video game car racing through a digital desert, accompanied by a throbbing electronic score. The images could be from anywhere: there are millions of driving games out there, with more churned out incessantly all the time (the animation here even looks a little kitschily pixellated: out of date as well as discarded). As we watch the synthetic vehicle drive through an arid virtual landscape, the digital pictures still aspiring to a future that has already left them behind, the castoff footage embodies the pathos of consumer culture's relentless forward movement.

SOS aims for familiar satirical targets: it is, unfortunately, nothing new to be appalled by the banality of prefab culture, to look with awed trepidation at the voracious feeding frenzy of consumerism, or be freshly astounded by capitalism's rapacious ambitions. The startling, and revelatory aspects of the piece are the amped-up speed and split-second precision of the performers' delivery, and the overpowering sensory surplus of every onstage sequence, as live-feed footage speeds around the screens, neon catchphrases scintillate in garish alternating colors—electrified blue, chemical yellow—and digitally dilated sounds scream and rumble. Even as *SOS* excoriates the stimulation overload of mediated culture, it also proffers similar gratifications, ravishing the eyes and ears with light, color, and sound. All the gaudy pleasures of consumerism's glitzy apparatus are temporarily purged of profit motives, and delivered as a delicious symphony of superfluous sensation.

But simultaneously undermining this technological bluster are the deliberately slipshod methods used to create the Realness Liberation Front's media environments. Projected onscreen, a particular milieu—a burning building, for example—appears persuasive enough, especially with the performers artfully superimposed over it. But seeing an actor holding up a homemade cut-and-pasted cardboard background to the camera—shaking it to simulate the tumult of the blaze—exposing the cobbled-together means of production, immediately vitiates the filmic situation.

Because of *SOS*'s constant surfeit of stimulation, there is always far too much going on to see or hear everything, and so spectators must, at each moment, actively choose the priority of their percepts. Splashed across the six screens, while also acted live before us, the RLF's scenarios stage a kind of instantaneous archaeology of their own construction. Pass your eye across the stage during the "Burning Building" sequence, for example, and you see, simultaneously: on one screen, to the left, the flaming building itself, sans performers, quivering in the frame; on three more, grouped stage center, two members of the RLF caressing each other's faces with mock-cloying sentiment while the building burns in the background; a further pair of screens, diagonally opposed to one another, displays the same footage minus one of the actors (the remaining performer is stroked by a disembodied hand). Even when the screens seem to be showing similar images, there are gradations in color—some parts of the images are washed blue on a few screens, while appearing more naturalistically hued on others—and discrepancies of scale and focus.

Further concentrating the visual density, the onscreen RLF duo are actually composites: a quick glance at the live actors below confirms that Real Time Film techniques are being deployed to knit together limbs and faces from at least four performers to create the two-character embrace we see in the video feed. The voices, too, are being piped in from elsewhere—borrowed from actors onstage but shrouded in darkness. Thus we must decide whether to be satisfied by the most complete version of the filmic fiction available (the love scene amid the flames)—placed directly upstage where the gaze wants to linger—or to let the eye rove restlessly across its constituent parts, both onscreen and fleshily present before us.

As was the case with *Flicker*'s jigsaw figures, here too we must struggle against the ingrained urge to see figural integrity where only visual dissensus reigns. Will we pry apart the faces and hands that the scissoring cameras have sliced from the actors onstage and stitched together to form the necking couple onscreen? Will we parse the ontological chasm between this grotesque, jumbled monster and its corporeal referents standing in front us? As with *Flicker*, the video hocus-pocus routinely lifts the gaze away from the live bodies of the actors themselves, but also as with *Flicker*, this is precisely Manson's point. Just as the two mesmerized shopping addicts dream of being carried away into the eugenic utopia of advertising's un-keepable promises, our own magpie eyes keep drifting to the delusive immediacy promised by the tantalizing screens. It seems that we too are susceptible to preferring slick surfaces to material presences.

In a similar vein, when the strobing projected slogans assault the eyes, should we submit the scintillating propositions to ideological critique, or just acquiesce to the dancing chromatic play of sumptuous colors? In other words, should we be reading the snaking sentences for meaning, or absorbing the flashing shades as purely sensuous stimuli, purged of intellectual content? This continuous confusion of categories is the center of *SOS*'s ultra-caffeinated satire. At every possible turn, the piece implies, our over-excited and under-contemplative culture forestalls critical scrutiny with easy sensory pleasures, constantly manufacturing consent with obtainable luxuries.

But, *SOS* also avers, subversive looking can be an art—and one with political purposes. Even as it pummels, barrages, and gluts, *SOS* also directs its spectators towards modes of tactical seeing and hearing that outfox its informational siege. Strategically tuning out becomes as vital as close concentration; the audience must sift *SOS*'s pounding data streams, creating a synthesizing reading built on choosy perception. Taking a bit of formalist distance from media culture's clamorous pleading, the company implies, can preserve the critical space necessary for anal-

ysis. To come back to Michael Warner's helpful terms for a moment, *SOS* addresses its audience as, alternately, both a public and a counterpublic. Just as its flashing interstitial sequences bedevil the difference between reading print and consuming riotous color, so too does the piece batter with a microcosm of media culture's unceasing vying for attention, while also presenting the critical tools to get outside the noise. The point is to fuel the mind with the visceral memory of the spectacle's appeal to the body, and to temper the body's surrender by attending to the mechanics of perception.

While performing, the ensemble displays a knowing virtuosity that counters *SOS*'s despairing vision of a culture pitched to deafen dissent. Showing themselves able to ride torrents of intricate text, of jumping fluidly from live-feed lampoons of filmic clichés to spot-on mimicry of music video gyrations, their acting style also suggests a productive style of political engagement. By mastering the mass media's arsenal of affective and perceptive traps, it becomes possible to stay just ahead of consumer capitalism's metastasizing reach. Properly deployed, pop culture expertise can immunize as well as anaesthetize. (Unlike their fellow travelers in the Wooster Group or Nature Theater of Oklahoma, the company does not make use of electronic memory to store recordings of the text for mnemonic help, or earpieces to prompt their high-speed delivery. *SOS*'s serpentine script has been tamed by human recall—just as the company requires that its audience actively labor to assimilate the piece's intricate architecture.)

In *SOS*'s concluding sequence, the arrival of the "blackout" fearfully postulated by the two chatterboxes coincides with the messianic appearance of the "ghost baby" collectively concocted by the reality-show revolutionaries. (Earlier, the RLF resolved to splice together the DNA of its members to create a trans-individual new being—a process predicted by Manson's promiscuous grafting-together of disparate bodies in the video feed.)

Now, *SOS*'s satirical procedures and perceptual tricks are abruptly torqued inside out: instead of displaying distorted versions of commonplace cultural tropes, twisting irony and camp into hellish grotesquerie, Manson now uses familiar consumer kitsch to create a series of images that defy all attempts to place them in any pre-existing apperceptive category—a reeling surprise for even the most jaded eyes, impossible to situate in the comforting realm of the already-seen. Shrouded by a thick fog interrupted by glaring beams of light, the performers cover themselves in full-body costumes made from scores of slim, interlinked birthday party balloons. It's as if some crazed birthday clown has imprisoned them in his warped creations.

Stumbling about the stage looking like ambulatory anemones from the depths of an alien ocean, the actors collide and grapple—causing a scattershot salvo of exploding balloons. As they merge into a seething mass—part primordial ooze, part rugby scrum—a fiendish apparition rears out of the haze—the ghost baby. It takes a bewildered moment to recognize that this chimera is an agglomeration of holiday inflatables, stitched together like a sinister science experiment: Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, a Pirate, a grinning Halloween skull, and other less-identifiable hunks of air-filled vinyl. Like *Flicker*'s visual instabilities, the moment of perceptual shock engendered by this sight is itself an opening to political insight: how often do we image-inhaling media connoisseurs see something we've truly never seen before, something we can't immediately file away with other, more comestible, theatrical or filmic tropes? The sequence's strangeness demands to be parsed apart—we can't simply passively consume it.

Leaning and tilting weirdly to the choreography of a puffing compressed air pump, the Frankenstein Monster of Kitsch throbs amid the performers' manic exertions, collapsing into a mound of inert matter as the struggle concludes. A bubble of semiotic confusion made up of hollow consumer icons has been definitively popped, leaving only slack rubble.

The dust kicked up by *SOS*'s showstopping apocalypse doesn't settle easily in the brain. The sentimental impulse is to read this sequence as the triumphant return from the margins of the defiantly material realities of theatre and the human body—pushing aside the displacements and deformations of the video screens. But the performers, hidden by their fragile, hollow



Figure 13. SOS's final moments: A strange apparition looms from the haze amid battling balloon creatures. From left: Heather Littear, Mikeah Ernst Jennings, David Commander, Ned Stresen Reuter, Willie Mullins, and Michael Helland. *The Kitchen*, New York City, 2008. (Photo by Dan Hansell)

vestments, are eerily effaced—they're no longer carved up among screens, but they don't look exactly human either. Whatever reality exists beneath "realness"—the more stable ontological state entirely outside media culture's distortion—it isn't one that our image-contaminated imaginations and co-opted political visions can positively picture. It exists as a tantalizing absence, a liberating nothing, the other of consumerism's insatiable void.

Ironically enough, the after-effect of Big Art Group's aesthetic of spectacular overload is measured, long-term contemplation. Weeks, even months, after seeing *SOS* you might find your thoughts circling back to tease out the political implications of a lastingly strange conjunction of video feed and live body, or the corporeal memory of critical analysis thwarted by retinal burn. For Big Art Group, the quick image is parent to the lingering thought.

References

- Beller, Jonathan. 2006. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and The Society of the Spectacle*. Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press.
- Gallagher-Ross, Jacob. 2010. "Babes in the Woods: Big Art Group's *SOS*." *Theater* 40, 2:33–39.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theater*. Trans. Karen Jüers-Munby. New York: Routledge.
- Manson, Caden, and Jemma Nelson. 2009. Interview with author. 'Snice Cafe, New York City, 1 December.
- Manson, Caden, and Jemma Nelson. 2010. Email correspondence with author. 29 March.
- McKenzie, Jon. 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Nelson, Jemma. 2010. *SOS*. *Theater* 40, 2:41–65.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Routledge.
- Wickstrom, Maurya. 2006. *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions*. New York: Routledge.