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Women artists in the ‘80’s can deal with—and need—“tough” feminist criticism. There are times when the ghetto is a needed refuge, but there are times when it’s just a closet—for anyone.

—Barbara Baracks, “Deja WOW” (103)

The feminist critic who writes frankly of a feminist production’s problems risks a certain ostracism from the creative community. In the spirit of progress, however, it seems necessary to point out the limitations of even the most well-intentioned feminist work [...] and to institute a dialogue that resonates beyond the confines of an insular feminist community.

—Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (120)

In 1980, Village Voice theatre critic Barbara Baracks attended the first international women’s theatre festival to be held in the United States, the Women’s One World (WOW) festival. In 1981, when the festival returned, Baracks did too, in order to write a two-part review series covering the performances. After her first review in 1981, Baracks received complaints from festival participants that she had not been supportive enough of the women’s work. In her second review, Baracks responded to this accusation with the assertion that “women artists in the ‘80’s can deal with—and need—‘tough’ feminist criticism” (103). She argued that criticizing women’s work was indeed a way of supporting it, and stressed that the comfort of community could easily become a stifling enclosure, a limited and limiting arena where success might only be the dubious achievement of refuge. Significantly, it was tough feminist criticism that promised to liberate women artists from this closet.

Seven years later, Jill Dolan published her groundbreaking book on feminist theatre criticism, The Feminist Spectator as Critic. By this time, WOW had established itself as a permanent performance space in Manhattan’s East Village, and Dolan was a regular attendee. In the afterword to her book, Dolan raised the question of the relationship of feminist criticism to feminist theatre production; she arrived at a similar conclusion to Baracks, but with one significant difference. In Dolan’s book, WOW is not the object of her criticism; rather, WOW attained a privileged position as the model for feminist performance. (As Dolan would later explain: “I went on to suggest that the performances at WOW offered the most potential for subverting the historically conservative performances of gender authorized by theater production”[Presence 6].) But, while she found these performances to be radical in their subversiveness, Dolan still worried that the insularity of WOW might limit its capacity for social change. She asked, “For example, how can the formal experiments with old contents
evidenced in the WOW café work truly contribute to cultural change? How radical is the work if it continues to take place in an alternative context in which its spectators are mostly lesbians with a predisposition to the meanings the performances construct?” (Spectator 119). Thus, while Baracks worried about the insularity of community-based performance limiting its participants, Dolan worried about how the confines of the community might impede the impact of feminist work on the culture at large. For Dolan, as for Baracks, it was the feminist critic whose job it was to overcome this limitation. Thus, both critics raised similar concerns: they both worried about the constraints of community, and both questioned the role of feminist criticism in relation to feminist performance. Significantly, these concerns reveal themselves to be deeply intertwined.

Anxieties about community-based performance are often articulated with words such as “confined” and “insular.” These terms implicitly demarcate a boundary around the community, where what is “inside” is seen both as being imposed upon by the “outside”—in the sense of being boxed in or relegated to the ghetto—and as having severely limited ability to push back and affect what lies “outside.” At the same time, these implicit inside/outside distinctions place the critic in an uncertain relationship to community-based performance. Because criticism historically has been associated with objectivity, the critic, by definition, is positioned outside of the community. Even when a critic feels herself to be a member of a community, the imperative to achieve critical distance may cause her to re-imagine herself as an outsider, a reaction that is evident in the reviews of the WOW festivals. Even if recent theory has convinced us that true objectivity is impossible, it remains an ideal toward which many critics aspire, and the feelings of “us versus them” that this striving can create are real indeed. As a result, the relationship between performance and criticism has often been viewed as an antagonistic one. A media critic’s judgment can make or break the success of a performance if success is measured by ticket sales and attendance. Academic critics have been charged at times with appropriating performance work for their own scholarly ends, applying interpretations that dismiss or undermine artists’ intentions.

In community-based performance work, this sense of opposition can be especially tense, particularly when a marginalized group is struggling to make performance happen in the first place. Such antagonism makes it difficult to imagine how criticism and community-based performance might enter into a productive relationship, but as Baracks and Dolan suggest, the two indeed exist in vital relationship to one another. However, they do so only once we stop conceiving of criticism as something that enters the community performance space from outside. Attempts to show how criticism might benefit community-based performance continue to reproduce problematic power dynamics as long as the critic is assigned the role of the intermediary who helps to bring community performance out of the confines of its insularity: In the quotes that form the epigraphs to this paper, Baracks implies that it is feminist criticism that will take feminist work out of the “ghetto,” while Dolan suggests that it is the feminist critic’s role to institute the dialogue that will resonate beyond the community. The problem with such assertions is that they fix the positions of both the critic and the community. As a representative of the broader public, the critic remains outside, while at the same time, those inside the community seem to be defined as inherently uncritical.
Yet, the very notion of a feminist community implies that feminist criticism of some sort—and certainly there are many feminisms—is integral to the community performance space. Critics do not institute a dialogue with community-based performance. Rather, their engagement must be seen to extend the conversation started in the theatre, taking up the invitation to dialogue that is inherent in community-based (if not all) performance. Performance practice and performance criticism thus reveal themselves to be deeply intertwined. Studying the critical response to the WOW festivals, we begin to see that what we recognize as feminist performance criticism (in all of its various manifestations) owes as much to the political and aesthetic work of performers as it does to the interpretive work of critics. We are forced to shift our understanding of criticism, to no longer view it as a practice performed by certain qualified individuals, but rather as a site where cultural change is negotiated, and most importantly as a site that performers, spectators, and critics navigate together. We must rethink what criticism is, what work it is doing, and who produces it. To do so is to challenge certain received distinctions such as those between social/political criticism and theatre criticism; it is also to recognize and value the relationship between the kinds of critical work being done by artists and performers and that produced by those who write about theatre and performance.1

I use the phrase “constructing criticism” in the title of this essay as a play on the concept of constructive criticism. Constructive criticism is an important notion for the community-based art critic, because the goal of constructive criticism is to be nurturing and reinforcing rather than destructive, and the critic is generally thought of as an ally rather than a threat when her criticism is constructive. But this concept can be pushed even further. Changing the adjective “constructive” into the verb “constructing” emphasizes the active—and potentially activist—nature of criticism. The active verb form also indicates that criticism develops historically over time: in other words, criticism is not only constructive or destructive, it is also constructed. Finally, the power dynamics of the phrase are destabilized by leaving the subject of the verb ambiguous, thus calling into question who is doing the constructing. Attaching the notion of constructing criticism to that of creating community suggests that these two activities are mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional and must be thought about together.

To be clear, I am not attempting to evaluate the state of feminist criticism or feminist performance today. Rather, my focus is on a particular historical moment when feminist criticism and feminist performance were making significant strides, in order to examine how these advances interrelated and informed each other. The WOW festivals provide an excellent case study. As the first international women’s theatre festival to take place in the United States, they provide an opportunity to consider the values of creating community and the critical work produced by community-based performance. Furthermore, they mark the beginning of a phenomenon that was destined to be a major influence on feminist theatre criticism. The WOW festivals were an entirely unprecedented event for the United States in 1980. They came about through the collaboration of four women—Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Jordy Mark, and Pamela Camhe—after they met in 1979 at the International Vrouwen (Women’s) Festival in Amsterdam where they were all performing. The women agreed that the festival was a great chance to network with other women artists from all over the world, and were dismayed that no such event existed in the United States. So they decided to make one happen. Without the aid of government or corporate fund-
ing, through the help of volunteers and the support of other arts organizations, they brought the Women’s One World Festival to life two years in a row, in 1980 and 1981, before establishing the WOW Café as a permanent women’s performance space in New York City’s East Village in 1982.

In the more than twenty years since, WOW has earned an international reputation, and has given birth to the careers of well-known performers such as Holly Hughes, Carmelita Tropicana, and The Five Lesbian Brothers, among others. Despite the fact that it has remained throughout this time a decidedly small, alternative women’s performance venue, WOW’s impact on feminist performance criticism has been undeniable; certainly, WOW is a familiar name to anyone in the US interested in feminist performance. And, while some might argue that feminist criticism itself remains marginal, it has surely affected criticism more broadly and has established itself firmly within the academic study of theatre and performance; Dolan’s work, for example, is regularly taught across theatre and performance studies curriculums. However, despite the importance that WOW has had, the WOW festivals themselves have received little scholarly attention. When scholars have written about WOW, they have tended to focus on specific artists who emerged from WOW, rather than on the community aspects that have defined WOW from the beginning. This focus on individual artists and artworks has left the question of the relationship between critics and community-based performance largely under-theorized.

This article is divided into two main movements. The first, “Creating Community,” addresses common anxieties about community-based work and its perceived insularity, and develops an argument showing why we should in fact deeply value the work of creating community for the contributions it makes to developing critical perspectives. Rather than suggesting that the role of the critic is to bring community work out of the ghetto and into conversation with the mainstream, this section seeks to show that the process of creating community is precisely what enables the development of alternative critical perspectives. I emphasize the process of creating community because much of the anxiety around community-based work comes from the idea that the community is a naturally occurring, isolated segment of society. On the contrary, community must always be actively created, and it is this process that produces the conditions necessary for the development of new artistic forms and new critical approaches to these forms. Drawing on the work of Tim Miller and David Román in their co-authored essay, “Preaching to the Converted,” I will show that community-based performance provides the opportunity for normally marginalized groups to engage issues of particular relevance to their lives and to explore performance forms that might most productively address their experiences. Furthermore, incorporating insights from Nancy Fraser’s critique of the public sphere and her theorization of subaltern counterpublics, I will demonstrate that, rather than insulating a marginalized group within the confines of an ostensible ghetto, community-based performance provides the necessary conditions for marginalized groups to produce work ultimately capable of challenging dominant performance paradigms and critical perspectives.

The second movement of this essay, “Constructing Criticism,” shows this process at work in the WOW festivals. This section looks specifically at the performance and reception conditions produced by the festivals and considers how they influenced innovations in form and content of the artistic work. Through close readings of a number of reviews of the festivals, I explore how these
factors affected critics attending them. The festivals are revealed to have created conditions wherein criticism was an integral part of the performance space; critics had to approach their job from within the community, engaging in the critical dialogue already occurring within the performance space rather than viewing their criticism as something imposed from outside. In this way, the WOW festivals generated important discussion and self-consciousness on the part of critics about their role in relation to feminist community-based performance, and can thus be seen to have participated in a crucial moment in the development of feminist performance criticism.

Creating Community

Invoking images of commonality, sharing, and fellowship, community is also a concept that generates great amounts of anxiety. If we think of a community as a distinct segment of society, rather than society as a whole, it becomes clear that every community is based on a series of inclusions and exclusions that determines membership. These inclusions and exclusions can become a major source of concern, both for the ways in which they seem to identify, label, and box in those inside the community, and for the ways in which others are seen as explicitly barred from engaging in the community. Whereas, we often theorize that anxiety arises over the permeability of boundaries—the impossibility of maintaining strict distinctions between male and female, for example—when it comes to community, it seems that the greatest anxieties arise from the concern that the boundaries around a given community may in fact be too solid. Those within the community worry about what is kept in; they worry that community work will have no broader impact because its effects will not reach the broader society. At the same time, others worry about what is being kept out; the fact that not everyone has access to community work, either because of official restrictions or social/cultural factors, is inevitably seen by some as a threat. During the WOW festivals, both of these anxieties manifested themselves: first, as concerns over the confines of the “ghetto” referred to by Baracks, and second, as worries over the perceived separatism of the festival.

Performers in the WOW festivals and their critics grappled with fears of what is commonly referred to in the art world as the “ghetto,” usually coupled with a descriptive, as in “gay ghetto” or “feminist ghetto.” The term is used to refer to performance in which audience members and performers alike are considered, by themselves and/or others, to be part of a community on the basis of some shared attributes, such as gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. The term “ghetto” is generally pejorative; performance in the ghetto is often stigmatized from both inside and outside the community as unable to make it in the mainstream because its artistic standards are not believed to be challenged by its audience, and its appeal has not proved to be universal. Staying out of the ghetto, then, tends to mean creating work that appeals to people beyond any specific community. As Lois Weaver told one reporter, “There is such a thing as the lesbian ghetto, where as long as you’re politically right, your art is OK. And that’s fine. It’s nurtured a lot of people. But straight people can’t look at the schedule and write it off because it’s all gay performers. We are artists. We want recognition for that first” (qtd. in Sowers 40).

Tim Miller and David Román’s co-authored essay responding to the “preaching to the converted” dismissive is useful in this discussion. If the ghetto is the
place where queer artists feel they are often relegated, preaching to the converted is the argument that puts them there. Miller and Román begin their essay by explaining that, "among the many dismissive responses to lesbian and gay theatre and performance in the popular press and even among lesbian and gay people, the accusation that lesbian and gay artists are preaching to the converted is perhaps the most frequent" (172). They point out that the idea of "the converted" implies a fixed group of people who digest the performance "uncritically and passively, without explicit interaction, and with immediate approval of the representation imbedded in the performance" (177). The phrase implies a static and stable identity for the converted which is simultaneously belittled as it is assumed. It erases and trivializes individual histories and suggests that, once converted, we (members of the community) no longer need occasions to witness our beliefs, to examine them and incorporate the insights of other members of our community into our own lives. Miller and Román argue that in fact, like the process of coming out—which is a lifelong process of repeated affirmation—the supposedly converted must continually reassert their beliefs in order to sustain them. Performing and witnessing community-based performance is one way to accomplish this. They write: “the converted” needs to be understood as a dynamic assembly that both individually and communally enters into the space of performance to sustain the very state of conversion” (177).

Miller and Román’s essay is a persuasive argument in favor of community-based performance work. They make clear why community-based work is important for members of marginalized communities, and that community must always be actively created. However, the concern persists that community-based work cannot contribute to broader social change unless it extends beyond the community. Therefore, it remains imperative to understand why we should value community-based performance, not only for the vital work it does in relation to the particular communities it serves, but also because it provides an essential arena for the development of counter-hegemonic artistic work, which ultimately plays a crucial role in developing new critical perspectives.

Ironically, while members of the WOW community (including critics) worried that the insularity of the community might mean that the work produced therein would have no outside effects, others worried about how the boundedness of the community affected those outside of it. One of the major debates to arise during the WOW festivals was whether or not the festival was a separatist event. Separatism becomes an issue any time a group forms in distinction from society at large. Separatism also has historical connections to the lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s, so it is not surprising that it became a concern for WOW. At first, in 1980, the organizers had intended for the WOW festival to be women-only. “On the one hand we didn’t intend to be separatist, but on the other, we want to achieve that strange heightening of energy that happens when women work together,” Jordy Marc told the Village Voice (qtd. in Smith and Harris). Others suggested that the importance of creating a women-only space was even more keenly felt: “at a women’s event we can let down our guards and not feel the need to isolate and separate ourselves from each other for fear of harassment and abuse (physical and/or mental)” (Roth 7). This response suggests that if creating a women-only space was about producing a certain heightening of energy, it had such an effect precisely because it provided a sense of safety otherwise lacking in mainstream environments.
There were, however, debates about the women-only policy within the community; eventually, men were allowed to attend if accompanied by a woman. But even this compromise resulted in controversy. The most scathing criticism of the festival’s policy towards men came from Erika Munk, writing for the *Village Voice* in her column “Cross Left” under the heading “Outrage Department.” Munk does not name WOW, but refers to an unnamed women’s theatre festival: “If you’re rightly wondering why I don’t say who they are, it’s because I think they are completely, dumbly, unaware of the issues, legal or moral” (114). By not naming the festival, she also avoids giving WOW any free advertising. While two paid ads appeared in that issue of the *Voice*—one of them on the same page as Munk’s article—the festival was not in its events listings. Munk’s outrage is perhaps surprising given that she is an outspoken feminist, but she actively works to distance herself from the WOW community: “[A] liberation movement that calls itself mine has the basic lack of decency and self-confidence to think it can and should discriminate” (114). Munk’s criticisms are highly personal and emotionally charged. She attacks the moral character of the WOW organizers by suggesting they lack what we might call common decency; furthermore, she connects self-confidence to the ability to act morally. However, one might also say that the WOW festivals created an environment in which self-confidence could be developed precisely by providing a space where standards of “decency”—which are, incidentally, often connected to notions about what constitutes “good art”—could be altered so as to allow for the development of new aesthetics and new critical approaches to women’s work. To suggest that self-confidence should have already been in place is to deny a history that has left women’s work consistently underappreciated and disenfranchised.

Munk further distances herself from the WOW community by ending her article with the threat that “[s]he may arrive in impenetrable drag, or send a flying squad of male critics. Perhaps gay, black, and Jewish ones who know about discrimination and don’t need it from ‘us’” (114). It is noteworthy that she threatens to send male critics, not simply men—and an entire squad of them, at that. This would subject the women of WOW to exactly the kind of objectifying gaze they were seeking to avoid. Munk’s next move is tricky. She imagines a group of already marginalized men whose genuine desires to partake in the festival are thwarted by the festival’s discriminatory policy, suggesting that the WOW festival is excluding people who might be important allies, or insiders, in the cause against discrimination. Yet it seems unlikely that any man who was supportive of and committed to the goals of a women’s festival would have been unable to attend based on the festival’s policy. The goal of the policy was not to discriminate but to create an environment in which women could enjoy performing for other women without fearing objectification or judgment by men. The type of reverse discrimination charge made by Munk has a complicated history; similar arguments have been made at different times on the left and the right, primarily in affirmative action debates. Most often, however, the effect of this argument has been to undermine efforts at redefining existing discriminatory power relations—in the case of WOW, the power to look and judge.

Importantly, charges of reverse discrimination are almost always made in relation to questions of legality. Indeed, Munk connects her moral critique with legal issues: “This is illegal even for purely commercial theatres, but it seems even worse when the sponsoring organization has nonprofit status”(114). The issue of legality that Munk raises is related to our notions of the freedom of expression and the concomitant freedom of access that accompanies it. These
freedoms are intimately tied to our notions of public and private space. For instance, privately owned, commercial theatres cannot delimit who has access to them because they operate in the public sphere. As public venues, they are protected by the freedom of expression and must therefore also grant the freedom of access—for the reason that, if individuals are to be free to express their opinions, others with opposing viewpoints must also be free to receive these expressions and answer back to them. Munk’s outrage at the WOW festival is directed at the idea that WOW violated one of the fundamental guarantees of the public sphere: the freedom of access for all. She suggests that WOW, as an organization that is not privately owned, should have an even greater responsibility towards the ideals of the public sphere. But this, I will demonstrate, is to misconstrue the situation in some subtle but damaging ways that will always work to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of marginalized ones. Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, and her argument in favor of creating what she terms subaltern counterpublics, is particularly helpful in making this point.

As Fraser makes clear in her discussion of Habermas, the public sphere is one of the most prized concepts of liberal democracy. According to Habermas’s description, the public sphere is understood as “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Fraser 111). Importantly, “this arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (111). In order to operate this way, the public sphere requires that information about state functioning be made accessible and that public opinion can be transmitted back to the state through forms of legally guaranteed free speech, free press, and free assembly. Thus we see how the freedom of expression and the freedom of access are associated with a notion of the public as that place where social change is made possible. But this notion of the public is not without its ideological problems. According to the ideal developed in early modern Europe, the public sphere is understood as a group of “private persons” gathered together to discuss matters of “public concern,” where differences among citizens are understood to be bracketed, along with “private interests” (112), so that matters of equal concern to all can be discussed. In other words, the public sphere claims to be a place where all citizens have equal access and equal say, as well as equal interest in the issues being considered. However, as Fraser makes clear, this has never in fact been the case.

The liberal public sphere—that supposedly all-inclusive space—has always been based upon exclusions: specifically, exclusions based on gender, race, and class. And so, Fraser argues, we must recognize that “declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so” (115). Women, in particular, have been historically excluded from public life, and the feminine came early on to be identified with the private sphere. However, women did manage to construct access routes to public political life, often in the form of alternative, women-only spaces and institutions. Through these means, women reworked the “private” as a way of gaining access to the public.

As Fraser points out, the bourgeois public that claimed to be the public was never the only public. Rather, there have always been a host of competing counterpublics: “Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of po-
politically behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (116). The existence of these counterpublics, Fraser argues, requires that we call into question some of the assumptions central to the liberal notion of the public sphere. Three of these assumptions are particularly relevant to this discussion of the WOW festivals and the controversy they generated. Exploring the critiques of these assumptions will help us understand how the construction of a community such as the one produced by WOW might function, not as a separatist enterprise, but as the creation of a counterpublic that ultimately affects the public at large.

Three particularly relevant assumptions concerning the public sphere, which Fraser argues we should reject, are articulated by her as follows:

1) the assumption that it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate as if they were social equals.
2) the assumption that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics.
3) the assumption that discourse in the public sphere should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of private interests and private issues is always undesirable. (117–8)

In relation to the first stipulation, Fraser argues that attempts to bracket status differentials always fail. She points to sociological research, for instance, which shows that in mixed-gender arenas, men tend to speak more, interrupt more, and be responded to more than do women. In this case, “bracketing” social inequality—or simply pretending that it does not exist—actually works to the advantage of the dominant group. Fraser therefore suggests that unbracketing might actually be more helpful in terms of giving voice to subordinated groups (120). We can see, then, that Munk’s declaration that the WOW festival participants should have had the self-confidence to perform in the public sphere is operating according to assumption number one—that the inequality between men and women should not affect the ability of women to perform their own work within a mixed-gender arena. On the other hand, the WOW participants’ assertion that the WOW festivals created a certain kind of safety and freedom from male domination finds support in Fraser’s critique of assumption number one.

This set of concerns relates closely to the second stipulation of the public sphere and Fraser’s critique of it. Once we recognize that power differentials exist within the public sphere, we need to provide ways for normally subordinated voices to be heard. However, this is difficult to achieve when we value above all else a single notion of the public sphere. If we don’t allow for counterpublic or competing public spheres, there is no space for subordinated groups to deliberate among themselves about their “needs, objectives, and strategies.” If we don’t allow for counterpublic spheres, subordinated groups “would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups” (123; my italics). Herein lies precisely the conundrum faced by the WOW festivals: they wanted to create a space in which women could explore issues of concern to them, and the aesthetic possibilities that might be capable of addressing them, away from the oversight of men. The insistence that they should have opened themselves up to the scrutiny of male critics (Munk’s “flying squad”) would have limited the possibility of these aesthetic, political, and social explorations.
However, this rejoinder to arguments made against the formation of countercultures does not by itself solve the anxiety of being relegated to the ghetto: the fear that, being separated from mainstream society, a given group can have no impact on that society. Again, Fraser provides a compelling response. She coins the term “subaltern countercultures” to describe those discursive arenas that run parallel to the dominant public arena, wherein subordinated groups are able to develop counter-discourses and “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (123). By developing new languages to address these needs—Fraser uses the example of feminist discourse’s development of terms such as “sexual harassment” and “marital, date, and acquaintance rape”—these groups put themselves in a better position to reduce the extent of their disadvantage in the public sphere (123). Similarly, in relation to WOW, the possibility for artistic innovation provided by the countercultural sphere of a women’s art festival, freed temporarily from dominant critical perspectives, is precisely what provided the necessary conditions for these artistic innovations to ultimately challenge dominant performance paradigms at the level of content and form.

Finally, the creation of subaltern countercultures works to counter the third assumption of the liberal public sphere: that it should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of private interests is always undesirable. The problem with this notion lies in the fact that what is coded as public and private is always done so in accordance with the views of the dominant group: the distinctions between what is considered to be of concern to “everyone,” versus only to a small minority, are never innocent and always reflect the interests of this unmarked, dominant group. Part of developing new discourses in the subaltern counterculture is about insisting upon addressing issues heretofore considered to be of only limited concern. Fraser provides the example of the feminist concern with domestic violence. As she explains, many feminists believed domestic violence was an issue of public concern, but they found that most people actually considered it to be a private concern involving only a handful of heterosexual couples. By forming a subaltern counterculture, feminists were able to develop the “view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies.” Eventually, through this discourse, they succeeded in making domestic violence recognizable as a common concern (129). Similarly, the countercultural sphere of the WOW festivals provided the opportunity for women to address concerns of relevance to women that were not generally considered to be of public interest, free from the criticism of those who would immediately dismiss this work for not having universal value. They therefore were able to participate in the process of developing a counter-aesthetics capable of addressing these concerns.

Thus, we might understand the WOW festivals as a kind of subaltern counterculture. By conceiving of them as such, we begin to see clearly that the WOW festivals were spaces already deeply invested with criticism—where social/political issues and theatrical and performance forms could all be explored and debated, and importantly, where the distinctions between social/political critique and artistic practices could not be maintained. Thus, by creating community, the WOW festivals also constructed criticism insisting that aesthetic and political concerns were inseparable. Critics of the WOW festivals struggled against received distinctions between these domains in order to critique the festival on its own terms; this effort caused many of them to question their role as critics in relation to community-based work. Although many of the critics reviewing the
WOW festivals expressed the viewpoint that their job was to remain objective, the WOW festivals created conditions in which critics necessarily became participants in the WOW community. The creation of the WOW community thus generated important discussion about what it meant to be a feminist critic.

**Constructing Criticism**

To understand how the WOW festivals established the conditions for constructing criticism through their creation of community, we must take into account the entire context of the festivals, rather than any individual performance or performer. The Women's One World Festival was an event that reached far beyond the confines of a single theatrical presentation. As the press release for the first festival stated: “The WOW Festival grew out of a desire to create an integrated atmosphere where it is possible to participate in performing and visual arts, exchange survival skills and expand social and personal growth” (WOW Archive; my emphasis). The festival thus blurred distinctions between theatre and social/political event. Certainly, one could argue that every theatrical event is also to some extent a social/political event, but I want to suggest that the form of the festival served to heighten this dynamic in several ways, producing a community in which real dialogue could take place, much like Fraser’s subaltern counterpublic.

First, WOW provided increased opportunities for interaction among audience members and performers. Both festivals incorporated workshops into their programming on such topics as lesbian playwriting, ritual and performance, clowning, mask making, and video. A café space provided a meeting point where festival participants could gather, network, and discuss the week’s events during the day; dances were held at night. The second festival presented evening performances under the banner “Pasta and Performance”; the four-dollar admission price included a pasta dinner after the performance. Also, astutely titled “interact” performances took place between the eight and ten o’clock shows, during which audience members could have a glass of wine or beer, socialize and listen to music, or see a comedy routine. The opportunity for interaction was also heightened by the sheer length of the festivals: eighteen days in 1980, with at least two, usually three, performances taking place each day; and eleven days in 1981, with three or four performances a day. Truly experiencing the festival necessarily meant attending more than one performance and engaging in dialogue with other audience members and performers. Performers also became audience members for other performances; thus festival participants encountered one another repeatedly on both sides of the footlights over a condensed period of time.

In contrast to the assumptions of the “preaching to the converted” dismissive, the community created by the WOW festivals was not homogenous. The festivals attracted an eclectic mix of women from across the states and internationally (at least eight countries were represented at the first festival). They represented a diverse range of sexualities and feminist politics, resulting in a diverse range of performances that covered a number of genres, including theatre, performance art, music, dance, comedy, mime, film, and video. They took a variety of approaches towards topics of concern to women. Some took the didactic approach, such as Barabara Jo Fleming’s “Contraception,” a dance piece which involved six performers doing a fast walk and reporting on the “male
marketing of birth control—what’s available, what’s not, and why” (Baracks, “Deja WOW” 103). Some took a more interactive approach, as in a piece called “Food Talk” conceived and conducted by Roberta Sklar and Sondra Segal of Women’s Experimental Theatre (NYC). In this performance, audience members were asked to describe their diets by decades on huge paper panels while Sklar and Segal “performed some marvelous food ‘fast talk,’ and . . . took [audience members] on an exploration of what we eat, why we eat, and how we eat it” (Blitzen 19). Other performances took a more absurd approach—for example, the Radical Lesbian Feminist Terrorist Group, whose opening number involved a gag in which “Deborah Glick sleazed out in bathing suit, boa, and Donald Duck mask. ‘I don’t understand it,’ she told the audience, ‘but they told me to come dressed as a typical duck.’ ‘Not duck,’ called a chorus of voices from behind the curtain, ‘dyke.’ And so forth” (Baracks, “WOW” 93). Others were the kind of theatre destined to achieve critical acclaim: Split Britches’ first play, Split Britches, written by Lois Weaver about the monotonous daily routines of three of her aunts living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, was first performed at the festival in 1980, brought back in revised form the following year (after Deb Margolin had become part of Split Britches along with Shaw and Weaver), and ultimately went on to have a rich production history, establishing itself firmly in the feminist canon.

The eclectic mix of experiences gave the festival a kind of cabaret atmosphere. As reviewer Deborah Proos wrote, “For me, the entire festival is such a diverse combination of talent and presentation, that I instinctively see it as a cabaret. Live entertainment, where fun and audience participation become a prerequisite for success, where interaction and sharing between audience and performer are constant—and that’s good” (8). For Proos, this experience of performance—in which interaction between performers and audience was constant—was radically different from her other theatre experiences. Speaking specifically of a cabaret performance piece by Spiderwoman theatre titled An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images (another performance destined to be remembered in the feminist theatre literature), she writes:

Their definition of theatre is very different from the one I know. . . . They extend the meaning—or bend it—to include a form that would not function as well were it not for direct audience response. All too often those involved in the making of drama pay little attention to whom they are speaking, or why. Spiderwoman theatre takes care to point directly at us. We aren’t told anything new, but we are invited to laugh at everything old, and journey for moments at a time to a place where our perceptions of time, space, ourselves, will change. (9)

Proos makes clear that the cabaret-style atmosphere of the festival helped create a community in which audience members felt directly addressed by performers, and also felt that they had the opportunity to speak back, and she connects this dynamic to the potential for change.

As in the subaltern counterpublic, all of the performances at the WOW festivals were created to address an audience of women and to deal with topics of particular relevance to them. However, this does not mean that everyone agreed about everything (this would be the “preaching to the converted” argument). Rather, a space was created where community members could experience the diversity of stances taken by other members of their community. Im-
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importantly, this process of discovery had as much to do with exploring new artistic approaches as it did with debating the social and political issues facing women. The community formed by the WOW festivals thus fostered innovations in form and content, and furthermore made clear that these innovations must happen together. One place where we can see this is in the emergence of a certain erotically charged aesthetic for which WOW performances have since become famous. This aesthetic is marked by camp humor, parody, overt displays of sexuality—often in drag attire—and a general willingness not to take oneself too seriously. Importantly, neither the form nor the content of this aesthetic replicated the dominant feminist discourse of the moment.

Performances foregrounding sexuality posed a challenge to the mainstream of feminism in the early '80s. During this time, pornography was, for many feminists, the issue for the women's movement. Andrea Dworkin's Pornography: Men Possessing Women, published in 1980, represented for many feminists the correct antipornography position, which sought at all costs to divorce concepts of “woman” from concepts of “sex.” Thus, to produce work that overtly explored women's sexuality was not a neutral act within the context of the feminist community: not only were society’s standards of decency being called into question, the standards of the community itself were put up for debate. The opening act at the second WOW festival made clear that not all WOW participants were working with the same assumptions of mainstream feminism. In a performance described in the program as “performance art,” Diane Torr, Daisy May, and Rebecca Fury—veterans of the New Jersey go-go scene—explored the experience of professional go-go dancing by performing erotic dances for the audience while also presenting their own feminist take on the sex industry. Rather counter to the going feminist line at the time, they argued that there are not many places where women could be in complete power at work and take home $15 an hour (Blitzen 19). Go-go dancers also performed during the more informal interacts at the second festival. Peggy Shaw’s remarks at the close of the festival made clear that these kinds of performances distinguished WOW from other women’s events: “I’ve been to 37 women’s festivals, and this is the only one that had go-go girls” (Baracks, “Deja WOW” 103).

Not only was the erotic aesthetic that emerged at the WOW festivals challenging at the level of content, it also represented a significant divergence from the contemporary feminist theatre in terms of form. As Dolan writes, “[performances at WOW] are antithetical in both form and style to lesbian theatre which remains in the well-made play tradition, of which the work of the late playwright Jane Chambers is perhaps the most well-known example” (Spectator 68). The fourth wall of the well-made play came tumbling down at the WOW festivals when women danced for other women. These were not just performances “about” go-go dancing, but go-go dancing itself, with all of the erotic charge and audience interaction that goes along with it: not just performances “about” women’s sexuality, but ones which engaged women sexually. Indeed, erotic dynamics were explicitly encouraged both on and off stage: audience members were encouraged to attend Jordy Mark’s Sex and Drag and Rock n' Roles, a cabaret performed at both festivals, as their favorite “drag fantasy.” Thus we can see that the emergence of a new erotic aesthetic was intertwined with the breaking down of distinctions between theatre and social event.

While the conditions created by the WOW festivals fostered the exploration of new aesthetic forms, they also affected the theatre criticism that was
written about them. This is due to the fact that the festivals created the same
reception conditions for critics as they did for all participants. This may seem an
obvious point, but it is one we tend to overlook when we continue to view the
role of the critic as operating from outside; we tend to place the critic on the
side of observation and evaluation rather than that of participation. But, in or-
der to experience the event, critics too needed to participate in the WOW com-
munity. This resulted in a heightened self-awareness on the part of critics about
their role in relation to this community-based performance. It caused them to
question their own position and to incorporate these questions into their re-
views.

Like all members of a given community, critics recognize themselves to be
simultaneously members of the public at large. As Fraser writes, “however lim-
ited a public may be in its empirical manifestation at any given time, its mem-
bers understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public, that indetermi-
nate, empirically counterfactual body we call ‘the public at large’” (124). For
critics, however, self-consciousness about this fact may be particularly height-
ened. Indeed, nearly every critic who reviewed the WOW festival—and they
were all women—expressed a struggle with reconciling her membership in the
WOW community with her role as a writer whose job was to evaluate the event
for a readership both inside and outside of the community. Deborah Proos, for
example, who identifies herself as a “theatre person” who “came to New York
City in search of feminist theatre. More specifically, lesbian feminist theatre,”
and who was writing for a feminist publication, still experienced a conflict in
how to reconcile her membership in the community with her criticism. She
writes:

It was hard for me to know how to deal with the WOW festival. Since I saw
it primarily as a theatrical event, my instinct was to comment in that fash-
ion. But since it is so much more than “just” a theatrical event—not only a
women’s culture festival, but also a women’s space—it demands a different
kind of attention. One which seeks a blending of the artistic, the political
and the social. One which will explain how the three work together, how
they don’t. (8)

Thus we see that the blurring of distinctions between theatre event and social/
political one created specific problems for critics; it challenged their percep-
tions of what criticism should do. When Proos writes that, seeing the WOW
festival primarily as a theatrical event, she feels that she ought to address it “in
that fashion,” we can only surmise that she is referring to a notion of theater
criticism divorced from considerations of political and social context. This would
be the traditional approach that values universality and the ability to appeal
beyond any particular audience. However, Proos acknowledges that the WOW
festivals made this kind of approach inadequate; WOW necessitated a kind of
criticism that would be able to account for the artistic, the political, and the
social, and how the three work together.

However, acknowledging this, Proos then goes on to lament what she sees
as the inadequacies of the two most common strategies of feminist critics in
dealing with this situation: “One is either too critical (taking the politically cor-
rect route which rarely comments on the art itself), or not critical enough (tak-
ing the ‘this is a women’s theatre piece and we are a women’s audience and we
should all be glad this event is taking place, quality show or no’ attitude)” (8).
The problem with both of these approaches, she implies, is that neither seems capable of evaluating the art itself: the feminist either dismisses a “good” artistic production on the basis of its ideological problems, or accepts a “bad” one because its politics are considered “right.” The feminist, in other words, appears to be only capable of commenting on the social/political implications of the work, while critiquing the theatrical aspects appears to remain the sole province of traditional (nonfeminist) theatre criticism.

There are other implications as well. In addition to asserting the limitations of feminist critics, Proos’s comments also suggest that feminist artistic production rarely if ever lives up to traditional artistic standards. Indeed, Proost admits that in her search for women’s theatre, she has found this to be too often the case: “I found it either spoke to my political unconscious a little too heavily, or lacked the necessary technical expertise” (8). The problem with these kinds of generalizations is that they play right into the “preaching to the converted” dismissive of community-based art. For the suggestion is, simply, that feminist art gets away with being “bad” because the women who enjoy it lack any critical perspective. Thus, enthusiastic support for women’s work becomes associated with a kind of naivete—or “blind faith,” to extend the metaphor of conversion.

Certainly, one can find examples of uncritical, enthusiastic support for women-sponsored events. One reviewer, writing for Sojourner: The Women’s Forum about the second WOW festival, claimed that “from start to finish, onstage and off, the WOW Festival was well-coordinated and smooth running” (Blitzen 19). Not only is such coordination difficult to imagine at an event run entirely by volunteers with differing levels of experience and investment, it is plainly contradicted by less supportive reviewers who note that “The Women’s One World Festival got underway Thursday evening—not with a bang, but with the balkiness of a newborn beast. Lights failed to illuminate, cues were clumsy and delayed” (Abbe). However, must we dismiss the first reviewer’s enthusiasm as so naive—as so fully “converted”—that she could not see the flaws of the production? Or does it ask instead that we re-evaluate the terms of our criticism and reconsider what constitutes a flaw, and how we define (if we even desire) a “smooth running” performance. The WOW festivals demanded that just these kinds of questions be asked. Proos ultimately allows her preconceived critical standards to change. Describing a clown act by Jimini Moonlight, she writes, “the cynic in me began to weaken. My vision of the infamous fourth wall—the maintaining of distance between audience and performer—lost its validity the more I witnessed such instant gratification on both their parts. My search for the theatrical was laid bare by a new belief that this monkey had power” (8). Thus Proos’s openness to the interactive, participatory atmosphere of the festival allowed her to value the qualities of a performance she might not otherwise have appreciated.

The interaction between audience members and performers affected criticism in more direct ways as well. In the second installment of her two-part series covering WOW 1981, Barbara Baracks begins by noting,

Any festival worth its salt is saltier than the sum of its parts. This has been true of the Women’s One World Festival—WOW. Enthusiasm builds—among performers, staff, audience regulars and irregulars—and, as time goes on, distinctions diminish between who’s on stage and who isn’t. The shows
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must go on, and they do, but as elation partners with fatigue, feedback stops being polite. During my 11 days at WOW, I wasn’t immune either. ("Deja WOW" 103; my emphases)

Baracks makes clear that critical feedback happened throughout the festival from all directions, between audience members, performers, and critics, implying that she herself received feedback on her review work. She also suggests that the form of the festival played a crucial part in this, if only because of its length. Because the festival was an ongoing affair that begged continuous participation on Baracks’s part, she was there, in person, after her first review came out, and other WOW participants gave her feedback on what they thought about it.

In that first review, Baracks makes clear her participation in the community formed by the WOW festival. She begins her article by announcing, “I’m spending my nights and days in a city of women” ("WOW" 93). She also implies her membership in the community by identifying herself as a “full-time lesbian.” The full-page review discusses how the festival came to life and describes in even-handed terms a number of performances. It is a positive review that transmits the energy and eclectic spirit of the festival and allows Baracks’s own enthusiasm to shine through. She ends by telling us she had to tear herself away from a rock and roll performance by the Bloods in order to write, and asserts that she is looking forward to seven more days of the festival before her next review. However, in her second article, Baracks tells us that after her first review came out, one audience member complained that she was not supportive enough. “Oh no,” she writes mockingly, “How could I, lover of performance, lover of women, not be sufficiently supportive of a women’s performance festival? Easy,” she responds, “I’m a critic. That dastardly role, with pretense to objectivity, appeals to tradition-and-innovation, and free passes, is not easily reconcilable with feminist events” ("Deja WOW" 103). Once again, we encounter the assertion that feminist events are simply incompatible with criticism.

Yet, if Baracks asserts this incompatibility in a sarcastic moment, she also announces her intention to inhabit this impossible position in order to carve out a new form of criticism. She writes, “a special tension confronts a feminist critic writing for a mainstream publication. It is a potentially useful and powerful tension, but always a difficult one, framed by the question: am I supporting my sisters by criticizing their art?” Baracks points to the tension of having simultaneous membership in two groups, but she suggests that this might be a useful position for addressing the subordination of one group to the other. She answers her question in the affirmative: “Of course I am! Criticism is no more a male activity than art is” ("Deja WOW" 103). This last assertion is crucial. By suggesting that criticism is not exclusively a male activity, Baracks makes clear that it is also not defined by a single set of standards. This suggests that if criticism and feminist performance are to enter into a productive relationship, it cannot just be a matter of holding feminist work to “more rigorous” critical standards, but must involve challenging those critical standards and developing new kinds of criticism. Baracks does ultimately seem to fall back into the discourse of the “preaching to the converted” dismissive when she writes, “Women artists in the 80’s can deal with—and need—’tough’ feminist criticism. There are times when the ghetto is a needed refuge, but there are times when it’s just a closet—for anyone” ("Deja WOW" 103). But importantly, Baracks brings feminism and theater criticism together into a notion of feminist criticism—a term that she was alone in using among the reviewers of the WOW festival.
What we encounter in the reviews are efforts to define a feminist critical perspective in the face of standards that have, oddly, already defined the feminist as uncritical. These standards produced a tension for many of the WOW critics; each articulated this tension as a conflict between her identities as a feminist and as a critic. As we have seen, this perceived conflict stems from traditional ideas about criticism: that a critic judges a work of art according to standards that are universal, and that an artwork's value transcends its social context. This perceived conflict also participates in the continued antagonism between criticism and community-based performance. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the WOW festivals contributed to the development of feminist performance criticism precisely by challenging this opposition, insisting that feminist critics find ways to make feminism and theatre criticism work together. Crucially, it was the critics' participation in the WOW community that caused them to ask self-consciously about the work of feminist criticism, and to actively question the relationship between their criticism and community-based performance. Thus, rather than remaining confined to a kind of insularity that would prevent any outside effects, the WOW festivals can be seen to have affected a realm historically considered to be outside the community-based performance space—the realm of criticism—precisely by insisting that criticism enter from within.

Community-based performance has extraordinary potential to effect social change when criticism is viewed as integral to the community, rather than as something imposed upon it from outside. Instead of judging the success of community-based art on its ability to appeal to established mainstream standards—thus placing the role of the critic outside of the community—criticism must be recognized as an ongoing development generated from within the community through the combined efforts of performers and spectators. Far from limiting the effectiveness of community-based art by relegating it to the confines of the ghetto, criticism that engages from within a community has the most potential to be constructive because it develops from a recognition of the value of such work. In this way, community-based art and criticism affect the mainstream: not by reaching out to appeal to its standards, but by questioning those standards and offering alternatives as rich and diverse as the community itself.

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Notes

1. Along these lines, it also seems necessary to challenge the distinctions often made between journalistic theatre criticism and academic theatre criticism. The audiences for each and the work performed by each may differ, but we tend to exaggerate these differences—and too frequently impose hierarchies upon them depending upon which side of the dividing line we work—rather than recognizing the ways in which these types of criticism overlap. Indeed, many of us actually perform both types of criticism, and certainly these activities inform each other. As an academic, I frequently am informed by journalist reviews of performance events; and as a theater critic for a newspaper, I
bring my scholarly perspective to my reviews. For an interesting discussion of one eruption of conflict based upon perceived distinctions between academics and journalists, see Jill Dolan’s chapter, “Staking Claims and Positions: The Women and Theatre Program, San Diego, and the Danger Zone,” in *Presence and Desire*.

2. There is extensive literature on the relationship of the reverse discrimination argument to the legality of affirmative action legislation. See, for example, Beckwith and Jones, Curry and West, Skrentny, and Fullinwider.


**Works Cited and Consulted**


Frank, Leah D. “Women’s One World Festival.” *Other Stages* 8 October 1981.


