Theatre of Isolation

Conceiving of a *theatre of isolation* presents the performance scholar with a conundrum akin to a tree falling in a secluded forest. As it is so often distinguished by the presence of the group, of collective and communal exchange, the theatre as an art form seems diametrically opposed to isolation—physical, social, mental, emotional, spiritual. How can theatre relate to the world while maintaining a state of isolation from it? And where does isolation lead if and when it ends? I offer theatre of isolation as a category of performance that engages with these questions and one that implies a tension between the social engagement of theatre, which is often thought of as having a social function, and social isolation.

In 2020, theatre artists were living in that tension. I believe their work proved theatre and isolation can coexist. I also believe theatre of isolation is not a temporally bounded category but one we can use to see this coexistence of socially engaged art with isolation in the work of theatre makers from other times. The 1970s in the US was an era of aftermath. American society faced as one (though by disparate means and with differing attitudes) the shock of the Vietnam War as it was witnessed on television, national financial decline, and the continued, violent subjugation of marginalized people. The political struggles of the 1960s, in a sense, continued through the 1970s, prolonged and deepened without relief as one decade spilled into the next. Given this climate, a desire for isolation or at least the expression of that desire in art, strikes me as unsurprising. For this essay, I have chosen to look at three artists, Adrienne Kennedy, Peter Schumann, and Jack Smith, whose theatre from the 1970s is isolated from the dominant culture—white, male, heterosexual, conservative, capitalist—of the time. Isolation of this type may be reflected in physical space, and I pay close attention to both real and imaginary architectures of isolation. However, my analysis is more broadly concerned with social isolation—how it happens, what it looks and feels like, and its effect on artistic expression.

The result of this isolation is not necessarily an increased understanding of the self, of one's identity, but a kind of solace that primes the individual for the monumental task of breaking new ground and resisting oppression. Such a claim is not new. Theatre of isolation can be classified alongside the antisocial and the anti-relational in performance studies, particularly as such terms are debated among scholars of queer studies.[1] However, I wish to distinguish isolation from the antisocial and align my analysis with the *asocial* as theorized by Summer Kim Lee in "Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality." The asocial, according to Lee, complicates and expands the state of antisociality of the subject, as a momentary choice to resist the social in order to "shift and reconstellate one's relations to . . . the socialities with which one is entangled," rather than deny or resist relationality completely.[2] "Staying in" is what Lee calls the performance of asociality in which the subject chooses to be alone rather than be out with others. In Lee's formulation,

> to have the need and desire for time away from others, from an outside . . . does not hold up a depoliticized fantasy of autonomy. . . . Rather, it points toward the desire to want to relate, to show up for another, but when one is ready, and in ways that alter the horizon of what constitutes

the social, and the political projects, collectivities, affiliations, and models of care borne out of it.[3]

"Staying in," then, is a self-reflexive performance of asociality, an enactment of "the ambivalent and rich aspects of solitude" for the purposes of protection and preservation, but also *preparation for* political and social engagement. Particularly for individuals who identify with a minority group—Lee speaks specifically to the effects for Asian American people—staying in offers "sustained and sustaining ways . . . of moving through a world that is messy, damaging, hurtful, and exhausting."[4] Staying in appears to be the antidote to the psychic exhaustion caused by the normalization of oppression, but does not preclude political engagement or outward expression, as in forms of public art. Lee further argues that staying in is in fact "enfolded within . . . acts and desires of going out" to participate in "radical, collective, organized action [that has heretofore characterized minoritarian political critique] within the social worlds in which we live."[5] Such collective actions have been inherited by contemporary culture through glorified histories of the protests and insurgency of the 1960s. From that decade's legacy emerged a "compulsory sociability," the belief that "one's political investments and acts of solidarity must be located in the realm of the social."[6] As Lee conceives it, staying in as a mode of performance rejects the assumption of compulsory sociability but not the collective pursuit of social justice.[7]

Staying in inverts the common conception of the antisocial or isolated individual as *outside*—outside of the world, disengaged, or perhaps a mere spectator. Instead, the individual staying in is staying *inside*, and by choice. What defines an "insider" is not, as the prevailing use of term implies, the power of being part of the majority but *isolation* from the outside world while one remains within it. Furthermore, this kind of social isolation is personal, and consciously undertaken; from it one can derive some agency, defining one's own terms of engagement. This unconventional inside/outside dichotomy becomes important for what follows. I am, as the three artists I will discuss in depth here are, always keeping an eye on the outside context as I delve into solitary spaces of imagination and creative practice. This outside, on the macro level, is the US in the 1970s.

The dominant scholarly narratives of American culture in the 1970s, and particularly those narratives that focus on the theatre of the era, provide contradictory summaries of the artistic landscape: it is sometimes monopolized by the echoes of Tom Wolfe's 1976 essay on "The Me Decade" and the nihilistic glamour of Andy Warhol, or, conversely, by artists characterized as community-oriented survivors scraping by in the middle of a national financial crisis. Hillary Miller argues that these analyses submerge "very necessary labors of institutionalization . . . in histories of downtown theatre that focus on the 1970s political separatism on the one hand, and myopic investigations of the self and identity on the other."[8] Marc Robinson prefers to look at the American art world in the 1970s as in transition, in flux and unfixed, a decade of indeterminacy, which is a description that this essay may heighten and, hopefully, expand by offering up a possible explanation for that instability (at least for the artists I hone in on).[9] I argue that the lack of fixity stems from, as this brief summary of seventies historiography suggests, a conflict between the solitary and the collective. Therefore, my own research on the decade is caught somewhere in the middle of the academic fray, seeking to spotlight what Will Kaufman claims are the concerns of the decade's drama with "social exclusion, isolation, and exhaustion," while denying any notion that isolation as aesthetic counteracts activism and community solidarity.[10]

Adrienne Kennedy, Peter Schumann, and Jack Smith are three markedly different artists, and their

individual experiences of social isolation cannot be conflated. Whereas Schumann, as I will discuss in detail later on, isolates himself by choice, Kennedy's (and Smith's, to a certain extent) isolation begins as the result of exclusion. What I believe these artists have in common (other than being contemporaries) is that the theatre of isolation mirrors the social isolation of the artist, which I will argue further in what follows. All three have received, and continue to receive, no shortage of attention, making them familiar to many readers. This allows me to focus on my point of contact: the theme and aesthetics of isolation within their theatre. I adopt Lee's approach to how individual artistic works both reflect, and are aesthetically influenced by, the artist's state of isolation, physical or otherwise, from the social world. In the sense that all three were working in the American Northeast in the 1970s, the scope of this essay is narrow and reveals my own blind spots as a scholar. This essay is not intended to be an encompassing study. It wants conversation: conversation with Lee and other queer theorists and historians, with other artists, and with present and future performance and criticism. I address this essay to future works in particular, in the hopes that the category of theatre of isolation will be a useful tool for the theatre of the present.

"I always just could very easily become a character in the movies or in a book."[11]

Adrienne Kennedy seems to stand alone in scholarship. On the surface she may be an odd choice for this essay, given that she appears to be very much a part of the scene in the seventies. She was involved with the playwrights' coalitions New York Theatre Strategy (NYTS) and the Women's Theatre Council (WTC) and her plays were performed at major downtown theatre hubs like The Public and La Mama. However, she continues to be treated at least from a historical perspective as constantly new and emerging, or else already dead and being revived, in spite of the actual trajectory of her career as a playwright. Though already the winner of an Obie, in the late 1970s she was, as alluded to by Miller, still a new artist to the likes of Joe Papp, who produced the premiere of *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* in his New York Shakespeare Festival in 1976. Stephen J. Bottoms, on the other hand, chooses to mention only the revivals of her work, which seems to devalue the new plays she wrote in the seventies. In overviews of women playwrights and feminist theatre, such as Brenda Murphy's essay for *The Cambridge History of American Women's Literature*, Kennedy is little more than a footnote: her name introduces the "explosion of playwriting in the 1970s that accompanied the second-wave feminist movement," but none of her plays are mentioned.[12] Then there are the places Kennedy is not named at all: in James Smethurst's 2005 book on the Black Arts Movement (BAM) in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, Jack Kerouac's name pops up five times and Kennedy's does not appear once. She is rarely counted among members of the BAM, though she was in conversation with the movement's leading artists. At the same time, her race and gender have contributed to her elision from other histories of New York theatre in the 1960s and 1970s.[13]

Kennedy's resistance to grouping, her lack of "group-ness," at a time when groups, collectives, and movements appear to be the central critical-historical focus, may in part explain the scholarly tendency to read her plays as self-contained or autobiographical. Kimberly W. Benston, for example, writes that "autobiography . . . is the very signature of Adrienne Kennedy's impossible though endless quest for a clarifying and stabilizing source."[14] Kennedy is thus placed in a room of her own, unsurprising for a writer whose introspective style of drama abounds with isolated rooms, frames, and other physical spaces as recurring metaphors.[15] Thus, Kennedy's particular theatre of isolation is characterized by the isolation chamber of the imagination, i.e. the funnyhouse. Beginning with *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), Kennedy devises the "funnyhouse" as a psychological isolation chamber where characters that look and

sound very much like their author grappling with the mystery of the self. In *Funnyhouse*, the self is subsequently broken up into multiple, "ideal selves," from Patrice Lumumba to Jesus. In her later works, the "funnyhouse" is given different names (the sleep deprivation chamber, for example), yet its structure persists as indicative of the same interior: that of the writer's mind. Luckily, we have snippets of the writer's mind for comparison: that is, Kennedy's prose texts, such as *People Who Led to My Plays*, which give context to the sense of isolation in plays like *Funnyhouse*.

There is a potential danger, however, in reading Kennedy as self-contained if it means downplaying the influence of outside sources. As suggested by the epigraph to this section, as well as the subject matter of *People Who Led to My Plays*, the books, movies, and other media Kennedy consumed are inseparable from her imagination and the spaces in her plays. Particularly in her plays from the 1970s, Kennedy is mining the American media, and showing onstage the complex relationship between the media and Black people. *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1973), for example, was the result of an obsession in the early 1970s with the way news reports depicted Mark Essex, the Black nationalist who killed nine people in two attacks in New Orleans in December 1972 and January 1973. "I feel like Mark Essex," she told Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck in a 1990 interview, carrying her own "tremendous rage against American society." On the one hand, as an African American she was forced to be bicultural, to read white culture as fluently as Black, despite being violently written out of that culture. Benston remarks, "Much like her heroines, Kennedy's work seems driven by a search for an incandescent touchstone of self-reference, some primal image, story, or scene, that would heal the self's constitution as wound or lack, its entrapment in dramas scripted from elsewhere."[16] On the other hand, Kennedy says, "I think that as a black person in America, you almost have to force yourself on society."[17] Kennedy's books and movies, and even the true story of Essex, are the "dramas scripted from elsewhere," and Benston interprets them as a trap of false identity. But it is perhaps this sense of falseness, when Kennedy wrestles with it in her plays, which is most illuminating of how the outside world operates against her and other Black people, particularly women.

In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, the Kennedy funnyhouse transforms into the silver screen of Golden Age Hollywood cinema, more enthralling to Kennedy and exclusive of her conception of self than any other "drama scripted from elsewhere." In the play's opening speech the audience is told that Clara plays "a bit role," standing outside the frame and the action between characters representing cinema stars Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, Jean Peters, Montgomery Clift, and Shelley Winters.[18] Even when Clara steps into the scene, her "lines" are read by one of these white Hollywood icons and she is separated from both the movie world and her own life as her diary entries, recounting her family's history and present relationships, are read aloud and subsumed within their reenactment of famous films. The black and white movie scenes are juxtaposed with scenes of Clara's parents and husband, who "all look like [black and white] photographs" she keeps of them. The play is always attempting to fit these two spaces, the screen and picture frame, together, but regularly fails. For example, the hospital bedroom of Clara's brother, in which she and her mother discuss her happiness or lack thereof, is at odds with the bedroom in which the characters of Marlon Brando and Jean Peters perform the teach-me-to-read scene from the film *Viva Zapata*, the one in "constant twilight" while Brando and Peters "star in dazzling wedding night light."[19] The simultaneity of these contrasting scenes heightens the disconnection between Clara's life and that of the movies, as well as between mother and daughter in their conversation, as mother insists that her pregnant daughter is unhappy without a settled domestic life while daughter cites her professional successes as a playwright as cause for great happiness.

It is significant that when Clara speaks, she is almost always talking about herself as a playwright. This choice leads easily to a feminist interpretation of the play as dramatization of the difficulties of being a woman—read mother and sexual object—and an artist at once. It is twice as difficult for a Black woman, with the models of womanhood forced upon her by white culture. As Deborah R. Geis argues, "Tension between immersion and angry confrontation of the Hollywood world experienced by Clara in this play embodies the ambivalent spectatorial status of the African American woman whose subjectivity risks being undermined by her identification with an exclusionary cultural apparatus." [20] The struggle for self-definition with these slippery models, which promise "fulfillment and female power" [21] but fail to address its limitations, then becomes a central concern of the play. I'm not entirely convinced, however, that it is Clara who is experiencing the tension Geis describes.

As Clara says, her image as spectator comes not from her but from her husband Eddie: "Eddie says . . . that my diaries make me a spectator watching my life like watching a black and white movie."[22] For Clara, writing is both her dream and her way of understanding her reality. Through writing she copes with family traumas such as her brother's hospitalization, her parents' divorce, her own divorce, and a miscarriage, on top of daily experiences of a racist and segregated society. Her life as such does not fit into the movie scenes—she cannot watch herself there. Instead, she must write her life in, and direct the stars from the wings in how to insert the language of her life into their filmography. The cohesion Clara and Winters achieve in the final moments of the play suggests that such a writing is possible to an extent. It is successful, however, only in the sense that each woman's end is equally evocative of a desperate situation. In these last moments, Clara and Winters speak simultaneously of the possibility of Clara's brother's death. Then, when it is revealed that her brother will not die, Clara describes almost falling down the front steps of the hospital, her crying mother in her arms, in a scene of family sorrow-tinged relief (her brother will live but paralyzed and with brain damage). Simultaneously, Winters drowns as at the end of the film *A Place in the Sun*. Both Clara and Winters, in their separate worlds, are drowning.

Clara's writing and orchestration of the film stars and Kennedy's writing of Clara are also united, in their exemplification of what Margo Natalie Crawford calls "black public interiority." Black public interiority, a similar contradiction to my theatre of isolation that Crawford explains, caught the BAM between viewing introversion as elitism and "constantly performing ways in which the personal could be collective and inner mental space could be shared as people deconditioned their minds together."[23] As a playwright in the 1970s, Kennedy was accused of such elitist introversion and yet her plays so powerfully publicize, in the act of performance, inner mental space. She engaged with the BAM principles and with white culture though neither of them would have her. In both cases she appears superficially as a spectator, as Eddie calls Clara, when in truth she was inside it all, constructing a funnyhouse to contain and showcase the complexities of that insider state.

"[Art] needs to be EVERYWHERE because it is the INSIDE of the WORLD."[24]

It is difficult to argue that any period in the history of Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre is asocial in Lee's sense, a respite from direct engagement, when their reputation is so closely linked to political protest and other forms of activism. The 1970s, however, saw a break in the company and, perhaps, a moment of redefining what it means for the Theatre's art to be "*inside* of the world." In 1970, Schumann moved from New York City to the small town of Plainfield, Vermont and, as company founder and linchpin, essentially reconstituted Bread and Puppet as a solo project. Schumann had become increasingly critical of the audiences and politics of the city where his company's homemade bread and

giant carnivalesque puppets had commanded street actions of the Resistance Movement of the 1960s.[25] "We the Schumanns," he wrote at the time, "are ready for a bigger slower style of motion, air breathing and vegetable growing included."[26] Many of his collaborators, all but two of whom he left behind in New York, perceived the move as "copping out." In their eyes, Schumann was abandoning the collective spirit that had defined Bread and Puppet since 1961 in order to join the well-to-do intellectuals and resort entrepreneurs migrating to Vermont for a taste of the majority white wilderness.[27] But as an artist Schumann had "outgrown the addressive-moralistic mode" that defined his street theatre of the 1960s.[28] At Cate Farm, the location of the Goddard College artist's residency Schumann had secured in Vermont, he could develop a new, personal style. The Bread and Puppet Theatre of the Vermont days, as I will argue, exhibits an isolation through disillusionment—the disillusionment Schumann had with the forms of political activism that consumed him in the 1960s. Schumann's move to rural Vermont would have a profound influence on his work up to the present day.

As an out-of-towner and an immigrant to the US, Schumann was unlikely to find communion in Plainfield. The Cate Farm period can be defined by distance from the audience, from coherent narrative and authorial power, and from *the crowd*. Lee notes that isolation "dynamically affords one the time and space needed to evade forms of sociability that late liberalism and subsequent formations of political resistance demand."[29] The isolation Schumann experienced afforded him the time and space to reevaluate his performance practices, which in the early Vermont days he tailored to his new circumstances. When there was an audience, it was made up of small-town Vermonters and students, and some of the Goddard performance experiments he conducted with student volunteers had no audience at all. This was a far cry from the socially, racially, and generationally diverse crowds in the streets of New York, an audience who Schumann saw as ideal for political theatre.[30] For the Plainfield audience, Schumann eschewed direct address and adopted the more traditional staging of the elevated proscenium, restoring a physical distance between audience and performance. He no longer saw the need for the conscious, aggressive alienation of the audience that characterized his New York street agitations. He wasn't making theatre for his audience anymore but for himself and alienation could be achieved simply by embracing the isolated place he already inhabited as an immigrant to rural America.

The first of the proscenium performances at Cate Farm were the five *Grey Lady Cantatas* (*Grey Lady Cantatas II-VI,* 1970–1975). In these *Cantatas*, Schumann had a new preoccupation, which is encapsulated in the image of the Grey Lady puppet crying a crystal tear in *Grey Lady Cantata II* (1971): an individual—or The Individual—as the central subject in a story of suffering. *Grey Lady Cantata II* consists of a series of tableaus featuring an increasingly isolated Grey Lady figure, whose life is made barren by the removal of all other people and objects until finally she dies. The Grey Lady, as well as most of the other performers, are large-scale puppets that completely obscure their human puppeteers. The few human performers, in turn, imitate the cold puppets, with grey-painted faces and the stiffness of automatons. The grotesque and opulent style of the puppets, the puppet-like acting style of the humans, and the use of marionette-type mechanization for removing props and changing scenery de-emphasize the presence and power of human authors or performers and prevent the audience from fully identifying with the suffering being.

Furthermore, Schumann wrote no dialogue which might have humanized the Grey Lady puppet or provided some authorial insight. "The story is definitely the audiences' job, not ours," wrote Schumann: "We have no free delivery of interpretations, librettos, symbols, special philosophies. We have a physical fitness apparatus of colors and other wonders of perception. Audience does the sport, the skis and

knapsacks of theatre."[31] Grey Ladies (the name given to American Red Cross volunteers who provided non-medical care, particularly during World War II) and other references to war might easily be connected with the many works of Schumann's that were explicitly anti-Vietnam War. However, as Schumann explains, that's a story for the audience to write. Stefan Brecht, a prolific chronicler of Bread and Puppet's history, speculates that the obscurity of *Grey Lady Cantata II* was a device ensuring the "privacy" Schumann had desired when he left New York.[32] Although Schumann's work had always attempted to preclude audience identification and pacification, the plight of the Grey Lady strikes a more introspective, unprecedented note than other of his works—and seems to reflect the artist's own state of mind.[33] In the evolution of Schumann's theatre, Cate Farm was a period of transition between the agitprop street theatre and the contemplative, moralistic tone and style that would distinguish his work from the late 1970s on. After moving again in 1974, this time to Dopp Farm in the even more rural Vermont town of Glover, Schumann would actually return to much of what characterized his earliest works: the movement of parades, marches, and circuses; "gigantic language" and spectacle; and, most importantly, subject matter that responded in the form of direct address to global politics. While at Goddard College, however, Schumann seemed to abandon his social activism for a time in favor of introspection.

Schumann's preference for The Individual as subject connects to what Brecht describes as presentation of a representation, without exhortation, a quiet succession of images without a transparent director's note. However, *Grey Lady Cantata II* presents the extreme of individuality as source for great suffering and suggests the individual's need for the collective. The crowd was still Schumann's purported enemy and the perceived enemy of all individual thought and artistic freedom, but such a production suggests that he harbored a desire to embrace relation and collectivity if for no other reason than that it was a necessary tool in the fight for the good of society. Schumann was clearly troubled by the tension between denouncing the crowd and identifying individuality as sickening and deadly. He hungered for some other way, some middle ground.

When he moved to Glover, he disbanded the Vermont Bread and Puppet that had formed around him in Plainfield and also turned away from the obscuring style of the *Grey Lady Cantatas.* It seems that what Schumann took away from his early years in Vermont and the intense isolation in the work of that period was the energy to reenter the fight for good in earnest. The early Dopp Farm period began with a series of morality plays, but shortly thereafter the enormous Domestic Resurrection Circuses—arguably the most iconic performances in the company's history—blossomed. The influence of Scott Nearing, the philosopher of capitalist secessionism and "living the good life" who inspired the American back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s (and who happened to be Schumann's relative by marriage), in the Circuses and other post-*Grey Lady* works is evident. Schumann's work in the late 1970s cried out for the "decent life" to abide by what he understood as the values of good and addressed a "universal" neighborhood as audience-recipients. The fact that Schumann's morally didactic theatre emerges after the reserved *Grey Lady Cantatas* recalls Lee's definition of asociality as a means of taking stock of political projects and perhaps altering one's plan of engagement. In a 1994 interview with John Bell for *Theater* magazine, Schumann acknowledged the dangers of the ecological romanticism that attracts many people to isolated green places like his farm in Vermont: the evils of capitalism had to take thematic precedence, he said, though he lamented that this world is not a place in which his work could be focused on the idyllic setting.[34] At the time of the interview it had been almost twenty five years since Schumann moved to Vermont, and in the intervening decades, he had eschewed the aesthetics of solitude and suffering in productions like *Grey Lady Cantata II* for community-oriented spectacles imbued with his

utopian ideals. There is irony in fighting mass systems of oppression from such a place of solitude atop a misty green mountain, but from Schumann's perspective, he was back in the mud.

"I want to be uncommercial film personified."[35]

Wading through secondary source material on Smith, I feel acutely the struggle to understand the introverted Jack Smith and to interpret his enigmatic theatre. With little surviving film documentation of Smith's performances to go on, the archive of Smith's theatre feels like a load of conflicting gossip and indecisive speculation. John Matturri and Rachel Joseph both describe the material elements of Smith's performances—the "homeless objects" or "glittering junk"—as emblematic of the inherent impossibility of fixity. Smith's orientalist aesthetic ("Egyptiana"), remarked on by Michael Moon, Marc Siegal, and Juan Suárez and compared by Dominic Johnson with Sun Ra's "intergalactic esoterica," is either camp or an authentic belief based in Maria Montez monotheism.[36] Matturri recalls Smith's "generous acceptance . . . of collaborative input" and the audience's "relaxed receptive attention" at performances in spite of their length, frequent interruptions, and arbitrary conclusion, which are at odds with the stories (which I will discuss further on) about Smith's verbal abuse of spectators. [37] These and other writings on Smith seem to depict a different version of the artist. However, it is José Esteban Muñoz's formulation of the artist as "the exemplary figure of the queer utopian artist and thinker who seeks solitariness yet calls for a queer collectivity" that seems the truest, and his conception of Smith's theatre as utopian stands as a direct challenge to the inclusion of Smith in an anti-relationist archive of gay male artists.[38] Muñoz acknowledges two sides of Smith, the solitary and the collective, that are so often kept apart, yet are very clearly both present in his oeuvre. Smith's infamous filmography of the 1960s captures the crazed, queer collective and Susan Sontag called *Flaming Creatures* "a lovely specimen of . . . 'pop art,'" lumping Smith in with a whole art movement addressing the American culture of the day.[39] The theatrical performances he began in the 1970s, many of which were one man shows, represent the other, solitary side of Smith. These intensely lonely performances of the 1970s are Smith's theatre of isolation, but even as they capture Smith's increasing personal and creative isolation, at their heart is the anti-capitalist utopia Smith dreamed of for all people like him.[40]

Smith spoke distastefully and fearfully in interviews of the archive (specifically, the Anthology Film Archives) as the "vault." The vault was unyielding, petrifying, and antithetical to Smith's preferred venue in the 1970s: his own apartment. In 1970, Smith announced that he would open his living space in downtown Manhattan to audiences for free shows. J. Hoberman described the "Plaster Foundation" (as Smith's home performance venue was called) as squalid, with a gaping hole in its ceiling and an accumulation of junk and debris on the floor, to which Smith lovingly tended in the performance series "Plaster Foundation of Atlantis." Over the rubble Smith hung fairy lights, placed cardboard palm trees, and constructed an artificial lagoon complete with a waterfall. In other words, he built Atlantis, which mythic paradise featured prominently in his imaginative writings and performances, out of a dilapidated East Village apartment. The Plaster Foundation was both the precursor to and the absolute antithesis of Andy Warhol's Factory, which promised consumerist glamor where the Foundation spat on it. Warhol may have been an "insider" in the eyes of the broader public, but Smith was tuned in to the ugly truths of the system that produced it and he dug into them on his stage.

Smith's style of performance crumbles like the ceiling of his apartment and is as inhospitable to the audience as a junkyard. Performances were held late at night and often began hours after their expected start time. Much of what audiences watched, which may or may not have been part of the intended

performance, was the arrangement of the set and other anti-theatrical antics such as Smith pretending to vacuum up the mountains of cement and plaster for hours on end. The action was frequently interrupted by further fussing with sets and costumes and the script was liable to be spontaneously rewritten by Smith mid-speech. Some Plaster Foundation visitors like Richard Foreman read this as evidence that Smith's imagination and editorial eye were always one step ahead of the audience. The fussing and adjusting *was* performance, striving for and failing at perfection in front of the audience. In such performances as *The Secret of Rented Island* (1976) (of which only a slideshow and audio recording remains), an adaptation/queering of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Smith carries the script in his hand as he interacts with a supporting cast of costume pieces and stuffed animals each representing an alternating set of characters. Script and inanimate actors, which "moved in and out of and were often simultaneously both within and outside of various roles,"[41] disrupt the interchange of character and performance, thereby exposing Smith as himself, alone and potentially vulnerable.

The irony of Smith inviting audiences into his home was that he seemed to want nothing more than to be left alone. If no one showed up to his place for a performance, those who knew him have said Smith would go on without an audience. These may have been the greatest performances he ever gave, as he was purportedly paranoid and plagued by anxiety in the presence of others—and by their mere existence in his psychic universe. He was known to abuse audiences, calling them "sofa-roosting cabbages," and sometimes he failed to show up for a performance in the hopes that the audience would leave him alone.[42] He was both pathologically afraid of others' criticism and persecution and assured of their duplicity: his living space featured a "hate wall," upon which he "scrawled animosities towards friends and supporters."

Performances like *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* featured nefarious figures inspired by Smith's personal enemies, such as film critic Jonas Mekas. Smith viewed Mekas, among others, as a capitalist vampire whose motivations were antithetical to Smith's own mission to construct an uncommercial utopia, and he believed that it was because of his foes that he was forced to "live in squalor all day long, playing hide-and-seek with others."[43] Dominic Johnson sees in the first-hand accounts of Smith's performance space echoes of Anthony Vidler's critical writings on the "architectural uncanny" that "conspicuously renders architectures to be no longer homely." Furthermore, "in Smith's domestic performances . . . the nostalgic associations that lived spaces may garner are pitted against the threatening or subversive oppositional structures that often encroach upon them. The set of processes by which architectures become strange are deployed as a neat proxy . . . for the ways in which they approximate other social and cultural tendencies towards estrangement."[44] Johnson identifies sexual difference as one of these so-called "social and cultural tendencies towards estrangement," thereby comparing Smith's space to the estrangement he experienced as a queer person in a heteronormative society. I agree with Johnson's comparison and see the uncanny space also as definitive for Smith's particular theatre of isolation. In contrast to the worlds in his films, which were built by way of the accumulation of writhing bodies, the transition to these home performances in the 1970s shifts settings to a one-man island. Even surrounded by audience members, it is difficult to imagine how anyone else could have authentically reached Smith's Atlantis.

The only extant and complete reconstruction of a Smith performance that I know of is a recording of Ron Vawter's *ROY COHN/JACK SMITH*, as performed at The Kitchen in New York in 1993. In the production, Vawter parrots the voice of the real Jack Smith, coming through a neon yellow earbud connecting tape-deck to Vawter's ear, as he recites the lines from *Marshmallows,* which premiered in the

last year of the queer 1970s: 1981, the year the first positive cases of AIDS were reported in the US. Smith ominously foreshadowed the next decade of queer history and both his and Vawter's deaths due to complications of AIDS, with the line "they love dead queers here."[45] Wearing him in performance like an ill-fitting shirt, Vawter pulls Smith out of the closet and refashions him as a tragic hero of the queer underground. In fact, Vawter described his portrayal of Smith as "homosexual 'closet'-performance," and when one considers Smith's relationship in regard to performance space, the invocation of the closet seems apt.[46] In a sense, Smith's theatrical performances of the 1970s were staged within his own personal closet-space, but rather than being a hiding place, it becomes legible to other queer people like Vawter. In *Marshmallows*, Smith says the "worst of all" is that nobody thinks he is acting. The solution is to "go back into the vault."[47] However, Smith could not hide from Vawter and his reading of *Marshmallows* as an overtly political, liberatory performance.

Smith's films were far more successful, at least in terms of making him a known entity, than his solo theatrical performances. His move to a more solitary artistic medium and to the role of "lone lunatic" is perhaps what led to Smith's failure in the society of the straight and *normal*. The theatrical performances are, in my opinion, his most radical attempts at what Muñoz identifies as escape through "refusal of a dominant order and its systematic violence," precisely because they were so much a product of Smith's personal cosmology.[48] Not only did he play himself, but he enacted his personal brand of queer utopia. His performance of self was so convincing to him that living in the real world became untenable. The failure to transform the real world into one's fantasy, argues Muñoz, is the typical plight of the queer utopian. However, something of that desire lives on in Vawter's performance and casts Smith as an icon of collective queer world-makers.

Conclusion

Jack Smith, the anxiety-riddled queer filmmaker-turned-performer, tried to build utopia in the trash heap of capitalist society. Peter Schumann, an immigrant who got his start in agitprop avant-garde performance, took his puppets out into rural America when the social and political pressures of the New York art scene became too great. Adrienne Kennedy, a Black woman playwright in the overwhelmingly white commercial theatre, gave audiences rare glimpses into a fractured mind simultaneously inside and excluded from society. I have described the theatre of these three artists, in terms of its aesthetic as well as the process of its creation, as a product and a reflection of social isolation of the mind and/or body—and particularly the mind and/or body of the artist. I have tried to demonstrate, however, by tracing the trajectory of each theatre maker beyond their theatre of the 1970s, that this isolation was not an escape route but a troubled state of being at the heart of the social and political issues of the decade and a means of reinscribing one's relationship to the collective. The plays and performances that I have examined operate on the artistic insights of the individuated while speaking to the issues of the collective. Theatre of isolation is not theatre that speaks only to itself. Categorizing such diverse works as *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, *Grey Lady Cantata II*, or *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* as theatre of isolation allows scholars to question how these works go beyond isolation and how they might draw individuals together and, as Lee says, "alter the horizon of what constitutes the social." [49]

For the theatre of Kennedy, Schumann, and Smith, the 1970s was an era of isolation, but what happens at the end of, or after, an era? One could turn to these three artists again, and examine Kennedy's *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, Schumann's Domestic Resurrection Circuses, or Smith's tragic death and status as queer icon for a few examples of going out, again. "After" is the topic for a different essay and for

another time.[50] However, thinking about theatre of isolation in the past is unavoidably connected to thinking about isolation in the present. When theatre artists who have been working in isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic no longer need to do so, how we will think about what has been created during this time and how "after" art will be changed by it are questions that are sure to consume the historian. Beyond theorizing the screen or Zoom as a medium—or perhaps as a way to fold those elements in with other considerations—we might look at today's theatre of isolation as not merely constitutive of social distance. How have perspectives on society and community been changed? By making aesthetic connections to antecedents like Kennedy, Schumann, and Smith, we might find examples of where theatre might go from here.

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[1] I'm thinking especially of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Robert L. Caserio, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, all of whom participated in a panel on the "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" at the 2005 MLA Annual Convention, as well as scholars, like Tavia Nyong'o, who have written about punk aesthetics through the lens of queer studies.

[2] Summer Kim Lee. "Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality," *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (1 March 2019): 27.

[3] Ibid., 31.

[4] Ibid., 28.

[5] Ibid., 31-32.

[6] Ibid., 30.

[7] Ibid., 33.

[8] Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 15.

[9] From a lecture in Robinson's course "American Performance in the 1970s," at Yale University.

[10] Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 72.

[11] Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, "Adrienne Kennedy: An Interview." Edited by the authors in *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 9.

[12] Brenda Murphy, "American Women Playwrights." In Dale M. Bauer, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Women's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*,* 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Barbara Ann Teer and the other "warrior mothers" of the Black Arts Movement are not even named, though their work has been reclaimed in other recent scholarship. See La Donna L. Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press: 2018).

[13] I have not been able to track down concrete sources, but Kennedy's exclusion from BAM scholarship could be connected to her lack of interest in the movement's organizing structures, or to her work not being considered (by BAM members) to reflect the movement's values. In the Forward to *The Alexander Plays*, Alisa Solomon writes, "During the 1960s and 1970s, many within the activist African American community insisted that [didactic, militant plays about race were] what their playwrights *should* have been writing. In those years Kennedy was criticized by activists for not working hard enough in the movement. . . . They objected to her characters, who were confused about their identity and place in the world, and who did not proclaim an uncomplicated pride in being black" (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, xii). Claudia Barnett cites Solomon, as well as scholars who argue against the use of a feminist label for Kennedy's works, in support of her argument that Kennedy defies expectations and stereotypes connected to Blackness and/or womanhood. See Claudia Barnett, "'This Fundamental Challenge to Identity': Reproduction and Representation in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy" *Theatre Journal* 48, no.2 (1996): 141–155.

[14] Kimberly W. Benston, "Locating Adrienne Kennedy Prefacing the Subject." In Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 115.

[15] bell hooks makes an explicit connection between Kennedy and Virginia Woolf, reading Kennedy's prose as a celebration of women's confessional writing akin to *A Room of One's Own*. See bell hooks, "Critical Reflections: Adrienne Kennedy, the Writer, the Work." In Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 180.

[16] Benston, "Locating Adrienne Kennedy," 115.

[17] Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck, "Adrienne Kennedy: An Interview," 7.

[18] Quotations from *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* come from: Adrienne Kennedy, *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). 81.

[19] Ibid., 92.

[20] Deborah R. Geis, "'A Spectator Watching My Life': Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*." In In Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *Intersecting Boundaries:*

The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 171.

[21] Ibid., 173.

[22] Kennedy, *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act*, 99.

[23] Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 169.

[24] From "The WHY CHEAP ART? Manifesto," Bread & Puppet, Glover, VT, 1984.

[25] Silvia D. Spitta,"Revisiting the Sixties and Refusing Trash: Preamble to and Interview with Peter Schumann of Bread and Puppet Theater," *boundary 2* 36, no. 1 (1 February 2009): 110.

[26] Here, Schumann presumably uses the royal first-person plural, as he did not initially relocate his family. But the plural "Schumanns" could also be read as his referring to his whole "company" with his own name. Quote from *Bread and Rosebuds* by Peter Schumann, 25 April 1970. In Stefan Brecht, *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre,* vol. 2 (London: Methuen, 1988), 18.

[27] Brecht, *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 12. As of 2020, Vermont is 94.3% white—one of the top three whitest states in the country.

[28] Brecht, *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 15.

[29] Lee, "Staying In," 33.

[30] Brecht, *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 48.

[31] Schumann quotes from an unpublished mss., "possibly an intra-company summation, dated Cate Farm, March 9, '72." In Brecht, 175.

[32] Brecht, *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 180.

[33] Spitta, "Revisiting the Sixties," 116.

[34] John Bell, "Uprising of the Beast: An Interview with Peter Schumann," *Theater* 25, no. 1 (1 February 1994): 42.

[35] From dialogue of Jack Smith's performance *What's Underground about Marshmallows?*. Quotes taken from performance recreation by Ron Vawter, as part of his piece *ROY COHN/JACK SMITH,* as recorded in: Jill Godmilow, dir., *Ron Vawter Performs Jack Smith: What's Underground About Marshmallows?* (1993).

[36] Dominic Johnson, "Jack Smith's Rehearsals for the Destruction of Atlantis: 'Exotic' Ritual and Apocalyptic Tone." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 19, no. 2 (1 May 2009): 177.

[37] John Matturri, "Jack Smith: Notes on Homeless Objects," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 281.

[38] Judith Halberstam identifies this archive, in her short forum response "The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory" as including the likes of, "in no particular order, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Jean Genet, Broadway musicals, Marcel Proust, Alfred Hitchcock, Oscar Wilde, Jack Smith, Judy Garland, and Kiki and Herb." In *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 823–4.

[39] Quotes from Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* pulled from: Douglas Crimp, *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 132.

[40] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 170.

[41] Matturri, "Jack Smith," 284

[42] From the documentary *Jack Smith and The Destruction of Atlantis* (2006), directed by Mary Jordan.

[43] Godmilow, *Ron Vawter Performs*, 1993.

[44] Johnson, "Jack Smith's Rehearsals," 169.

[45] Here, I suggest the "queer seventies," in the U.S., as beginning in 1969, with the Stonewall Riots in New York's Greenwich Village, and the ending with the first reports of AIDS cases in 1981.

[46] Godmilow, *Ron Vawter Performs*, 1993.

[47] Ibid., 1993.

[48] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 172.

[49] Lee, "Staying In," 31.

[50] In addition to Lee's discussion of what happens "after," Joshua Chambers-Letson's recent book *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York University Press, 2018) is dedicated to the question this essay does not answer.

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