

Bubonic Tourist Performance Creation Society
Calgary, AB

Tearing Up the Road to Hell

The Intentional Fallacy and Grand Stand: Live Performance in Inter-Disciplinary Art

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“Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle”
— W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley,
“The Intentional Fallacy”

Much of what passes for criticism in 2004 — everything from vapid celebrity puff pieces to promotional interviews that pretend to be more serious and high-minded — is rife with the underlying assumption that an understanding of an artist’s intentions will help us to understand their work. But, as Wimsatt and Beardsley showed us as early as 1946, that understanding does not necessarily help us at all. They may have outlined the intentional fallacy in the field of literary criticism but today its main tenets can just as easily be transposed to the criticism of any art form.

Keeping that in mind, it can be helpful to think of Grand Stand, an event focused on the intersections between live performance and inter-disciplinary art, as a work of criticism in its own right, albeit one that incorporated performing artists, an emcee, an audience and an abundance of lively debate. Moreover, like all valuable criticism, it also contained an explicitly articulated political and cultural agenda, in this case to provoke discussion about two specific questions:

1. What is the performer’s relationship with technology; and
2. What is the performer’s relationship with the audience?

As any humanist might expect of the inquiry into the relationship between humans and other humans — as opposed to that between humans and machines — the second question is somewhat more complicated than the first, even if it carries less cultural cachet. Given that the audience at Grand Stand was requested not merely to pose questions to the performers but also to participate actively in discussion with them, we can see that the very structure of the event cast doubt upon the distinction between “audience” and “performer.” This blurring of boundaries might seem like philosophical question-begging — in that the event proposes an answer of sorts

to the question it sets out to resolve — but it also shifted the discussion away from the intention of the artists and toward more wide-reaching issues in culture and society.

The challenge, then, is one of assessing Grand Stand's value not merely in relation to the questions it set out to answer, but to those that it inevitably raised — and there were many, some posed by host and moderator Blake Brooker and others posed by the audience. It is worthwhile to note that the three artists on the panel — musician Chad Van Gaalen, dancer-choreographer Danielle McCulloch and multi-media art creator Patricia Duquette — were perhaps not capable of answering those questions. Despite the fact that, in our society, artists are frequently mistaken for intellectuals, their ideas are usually best expressed through their work — hence, the epigraph on this essay.

Nevertheless, Grand Stand deftly dodged the intentional fallacy by shifting the topic of conversation from intention to process and by opening the floor to comments and questions from the audience, which was largely comprised of people from the Calgary arts scene. From a critical point of view, this audience interaction was Grand Stand's most valuable contribution to the community, especially in a city where there is very little serious public conversation about art, at least outside of a promotional context. It was no surprise, then, that a lively, free-flowing and sometimes heated debate developed concerning, among other issues, the place of social activism in art, the possibilities for artists to make a living off their work, the values and aesthetics of popular art versus those of marginalized art, the elitist idea that popular spectacle is an invalid way to reach an audience (no matter how large and unsophisticated that audience may be), and the notion that culture is something one participates in as opposed to something one consumes.

Clearly, none of these individual issues could be fully addressed in a brief, 70-minute conversation, but it is curious to note that the panelists onstage seemed much more focused and engaged when discussing these ideas than they did when speaking expressly about their own work — witness the following exchange between Van Gaalen and McCulloch:

Van Gaalen (*to McCulloch*): “Yeah, like, I wanted to start laughing right there, when you started dancing....”

McCulloch: “That would be OK—”

Van Gaalen: “Yeah, I knew [that] but I totally held it back.... Because you were going crazy, and I was, like, ‘That’s fucking crazy!’ But I, like, held it inside....”

McCulloch: “As a culture, we’re considered the polite culture, and I don’t think that’s doing us any favours. I think we can be honest without being mean. I tend to be really blunt in the way I speak. I have no intention of being mean, but there should be more room for that — [so] we can engage with each other and with ideas, and help support each other to be more creative.”

Again, all artists are not necessarily intellectuals, but this earnest focus on honest and open discussion as an integral part of the creative process is testament to the value of Grand Stand, especially in a well-mannered cultural environment where criticism is frequently equated with hostility. As an inter-disciplinary performance that blurred the boundaries between audience,

performer and critic, Grand Stand became a work of criticism that raised more questions than it answered. Most importantly, Grand Stand allowed those unanswered questions to resonate out into the community, where both audiences and performers — informed with social, political and cultural agenda of their own — can express critical perspectives about their constantly evolving relationship.

Bibliography

Wimsatt, W.K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Critical Theory Since Plato*.
Ed. Hazard Adams. Revised edition. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. 945-51.