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# Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics



## Synopsis

'Social Works is a game-changer, a must-read for scholars, students and artists alike' — *Public Art Review*, 2011, Issue 45  
Tom Finkelpearl At a time when art world critics and curators heavily debate the social, and when community organizers and civic activists are reconsidering the role of aesthetics in social reform, this book makes explicit some of the contradictions and competing stakes of contemporary experimental art-making. *Social Works* is an interdisciplinary approach to the forms, goals and histories of innovative social practice in both contemporary performance and visual art. Shannon Jackson uses a range of case studies and contemporary methodologies to mediate between the fields of visual and performance studies. The result is a brilliant analysis that not only incorporates current political and aesthetic discourses but also provides a practical understanding of social practice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'Social Works takes an interdisciplinary look at the forms, goals, and histories of innovative social practice in contemporary performance and visual art. Shannon Jackson presents a range of case studies and contemporary methodologies to examine the fields for performative and visual art studies.' — *Public Art Review*, 2011, Issue 45  
Shannon Jackson offers vivid close readings of art and performance and she considers social issues relating to welfare, sanitation, urban planning, and globalisation, and how they coincide with class, gender, race, and especially labour. This will be a useful, enriching, and stimulating book for artists, students, and academics across art, performance, and social theory.

Jen Harvie, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 'Throughout the various studies that comprise *Social Works*, Jackson demonstrates the critical mobility across psychoanalysis, feminist, queer, and critical race theory needed to produce interpretations that trouble the very grounds of what constitutes art, life, and the public.'

— Jennifer Cayer, *e-misférica* 'Jackson presents an informed and critical exploration of the 'social turn' in contemporary art, and overall, what is offered here is a thorough re-visioning of how the social phenomena of theatre and performance might be thought about and understood... This brilliant book asks us to think about art and performance as forms of human welfare, performatively creating and sustaining systems of social support, and working in ways that secure the maintenance of life.'

— Jenny Hughes, *New Theatre Quarterly* 'Shannon Jackson's superb new book is, in a very challenging way, about vocabulary. Bypassing even eschewing language sometime dissed as "jargon," Jackson forces readers to think and think again about basic terms such as "performance," "social practice," "art," "politics," and "public"..... Jackson's book is an invitation to consume art promiscuously but to choose words as if the future of the world depended upon them.'

— Dorothy Chansky, *TDR: The Drama Review* 'This is a subtle, nuanced and socially committed book that should be widely read.'

— Stephen Bottoms, *Theatre Research International* 'Amidst the upheaval of the 'social turn', *Social Works* is a pivotal landmark. As we attempt to conceive of 'the aesthetic' and 'the social' together in performance and across the arts, Jackson's articulation of what she calls the "support" of a performance, that is, the real social, economic, and even logistical conditions that allow it to come to be, is a great contribution to the debate. In her distinctive voice, Jackson offers pertinent and noteworthy examples to unfold a sophisticated framework for understanding the political, ethical, and aesthetic implications of the social turn. She 'explore[s] the social aspirations of socially engaged projects less as the extra-aesthetic milieu that legitimates or compromises the aesthetic act and more as the unraveling of the frame that would cast "the social" as "extra" (16). This stance subtly rewrites the grounding of performance studies, and Jackson's far-reaching book is thus a vital reference at this moment of transition.'

— James Andrew Wilson, PhD Candidate, University of Warwick 'Jackson's phenomenal book shifts the discussion from taste to ethnography in her critical examination of the intersection of social art, performance and theater. Not only a must read for those interested in the intersections of art and social change, but perhaps more importantly, for those searching for a calibrated compass in the age of vast interdisciplinary art production.'

Nato Thompson, Chief Curator, *Creative Time* 'Social Works is a thrilling encounter: a politically important and intellectually innovative book. Shannon Jackson's exploration of the social work that underpins and enables the making of art is wonderfully

judged. She draws out the ways in which art, politics and the public realm are intimately interwoven. The book is itself a vital and generous piece of social work.' John Clarke, Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University 'Social Works is essential reading for anyone interested in the past, present and future of art at the intersection of performance and social practice. Shannon Jackson combines impeccable research and rigorous critical thinking with a lucid, approachable writing style. I have found this book invaluable in my work as both a curator and a critic.' Andy Horowitz, Founder, Culturebot.org

Shannon Jackson is the director of the Arts Research Center at University of California at Berkeley where she is also Professor of Rhetoric and of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies. Her award-winning previous publications include *Professing Performance* (2004) and *Lines of Activity* (2000).

This slippery art world, desperate for clean definitions of everything, anxious to place each work into a category by which it may be diffused and understood and then mastered. This book may help that or it may hurt that for each reader. Jackson collected a vast amount of research to support her position, and it is done exceptionally well. I want everyone who see's my work to have already read this so we can skip over the usual volley of questions. Now I often just tell people to read *Social Works* and then get back to me. If you choose not to read this now you will find yourself reading it in a few years when it becomes the standard by which we understand the current state of contemporary art. Which is to say, even if you don't agree with the author you better understand the argument. I assigned to my students for next quarter you should too.

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