

Institutional Theatrics



PERFORMANCE WORKS

SERIES EDITORS
Patrick Anderson and
Nicholas Ridout

This series publishes books in theater and performance studies, focused in particular on the material conditions in which performance acts are staged, and to which performance itself might contribute. We define “performance” in the broadest sense, including traditional theatrical productions and performance art, but also cultural ritual, political demonstration, social practice, and other forms of interpersonal, social, and political interaction that may fruitfully be understood in terms of performance.

Institutional Theatrics

Performing Arts Policy in Post-Wall Berlin



Brandon Woolf



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Copyright © 2021 by Northwestern University Press.
Published 2021. All rights reserved.

Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

Copyright © 2021 by Northwestern University Press.
Published 2021. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Woolf, Brandon, author.

Title: Institutional theatrics : performing arts policy in post wall Berlin / Brandon Woolf.

Other titles: Performance works.

Description: Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 2021. |

Series: Performance works | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020056751 | ISBN 9780810143555 (paperback) |

ISBN 9780810143562 (cloth) | ISBN 9780810143579 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Performing arts—Government policy—Germany—Berlin. |

Theater and society—Germany—Berlin. | Berlin (Germany)—Cultural policy.

Classification: LCC PN2044.G4 W66 2021 | DDC 792.0943/155—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020056751>

Copyright © 2021 by Northwestern University Press.
Published 2021. All rights reserved.

In memory of
Marvin Perlowin,
Vera Cohen,
and
Traute Petereit,
whose *freie Geister* inevitably run through these pages

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	
Arts of Institutional Dis/avowal: Putting Performance into Policy Studies	1
Part 1: State-Stages	
Chapter 1	
“Is There a Cultural Policy?”: Debating the Demise of the State-Stage Complex	27
Chapter 2	
Frank Castorf’s <i>Lehrstück</i> : Refunctioning Brecht’s Institutional Legacy at the Volksbühne	63
Part 2: Free-Scenes	
Chapter 3	
Haunted Infrastructures of Public Memory: Performing the Many Facades of the Palast der Republik	103
Chapter 4	
Occupying the Immaterial Institution; or, Performing Policy Postdramatically: andcompany&Co.’s (<i>Coming</i>) <i>Insurrection</i>	135
Epilogue	
Dis/avowing Dis/avowal?: Dercon Debacle Redux	177
List of Abbreviations	187
Notes	189
Bibliography	239
Index	257

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Institutional Theatrics would not have been possible without absolutely unwavering avowal and expansive support from a vast array of institutions and individuals on both sides of the Atlantic. It is an honor to begin this book by expressing my immense (perhaps immeasurable) gratitude to all of them.

I begin with the network of organizations that more than generously funded my work as I lived in and moved between Berkeley (three years), Berlin (six years), and New York City (four years). At University of California, Berkeley, I am deeply appreciative to the Graduate Division, the Program in Critical Theory, the Department of German, and the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies. Thank you to the Fulbright Foundation, the DAAD, as well as the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies, the Institute of Theater Studies, and the International Research Center for “Interweaving Performance Cultures” at the Freie Universität Berlin. At New York University, I have been so generously supported by the College of Arts and Science, NYU Skirball, NYU Center for the Humanities, and most especially, the Department of English. The gracious encouragement and assistance from the staff at each of these places warmed my heart at every turn. Special thanks go to Mary Ajideh, Claudia Daseking, Robin Davidson, Lissette Florez, Karin Goihl, Alexandra Guillen, Paget Harris, Holger Hartung, Armin Hempel, Jaysen Henderson-Greenbey, Grace Leach, Alyssa Leal, Kate Mattson, Mary Mezzano, Patricia Okoh-Esene, and Bennett Williams.

This book began as a dissertation at UC Berkeley, where I had the incredible privilege of studying with, working for, and always learning from wonderful teachers. Heartfelt thanks to Judith Butler, Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Abigail De Kosnik, Peter Glazer, Yvonne Hardt, Robert Kaufman, Angela Marino, Freddie Rokem, Kaja Silverman, and Linda Williams. I was so fortunate to have a dissertation committee that remained such committed and enthusiastic readers, advice givers, critics, and supports—in spite of my great distance from California much of the time. Thank you to Martin Jay for his ever-discerning eye, his encyclopedic further-reading suggestions, his thick and timely manila envelopes of helpful comments and critique, and for my first extended foray into the world of Adorno. Thank you to Catherine Cole for her always-incisive professional advice, her lived model of self-reflexive organizational reorientation and leadership, and her warm and welcoming open-door policy to discuss most anything. Thank you to Tony Kaes for so many inspiring and multihour conversations, for all the Berlin

theater adventures, and for his consistent generosity of spirit and profound kindness. And I want extend my deep gratitude to Shannon Jackson, who was much more than an adviser along the way—she has been a mentor and a guiding force. I feel so very lucky to be the recipient of her generosity, her insight, and her inspiration.

My research consisted of what felt like constant movement between the theater, the library, the archive, the classroom, the demonstration, the living room, the park, the canal, and the café in a Berlin that continued to reveal itself anew with the help of a giant cast of loving guides. Thank you to Hans-Thies Lehmann and Helene Varopoulou for inviting me into their home for tea, theory, and politics, for trips to the theater, for their seemingly limitless Rolodex, their mentorship, and their embrace. Thank you to Matthias Warstat, Christel Weiler, and Erika Fischer-Lichte for inviting me into (and extending my time with) the theater studies community at FU Berlin, and to Evelyn Annuss, Peter Boenisch, Adam Czirak, Kristin Flade, Julius Heinicke, Ramona Mosse, David Savran, and Florian Thamer for the always provocative and productive conversations while there. I owe so much to the staff at the archives of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, and especially to Sabine Zolchow, whose patience never waned as she helped me navigate the history of theater *nach der Wende*. Thank you to Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, Elke Knöss-Grillitsch, Sean Patten, Aenne Quiñones, Berit Stumpf, and Sarah Waterfeld for making so much time to talk to me about their inspiring projects. And a special thank-you to Alex Karschnia for his energy, curiosity, commitment, and friendship.

Since arriving at NYU in 2016, I have benefited from many forms of generosity from across the university. I am grateful to John Archer, Tom Augst, Richard Halpern, Wendy Anne Lee, John Waters, and the rest of my colleagues in the English Department for welcoming me into the fold at 244 Greene Street. And thank you to Gwendolyn Alker, Sebastián Calderón Ben-tin, J de Leon, Erin Mee, Robert Vorlicky, and Alisa Zhulina for inviting me into NYU's broader theater and performance community. Without the gracious mentorship and boundless generosity of Una Chaudhuri and Patrick Deer I would be lost. I owe a great deal to Jay Wegman for his warmth and his endless enthusiasm for big new ideas. And Julia Jarcho, somehow our paths have continued to cross, and I am just so grateful for her brilliance, her friendship, and her baked goods.

Most humble thanks to Nicholas Ridout and Patrick Anderson for including this book in their Performance Works series. Trevor Perri, Maia Rigas, and the rest of the team at Northwestern University Press have been so generous and skilled in shepherding the project through production. I am very thankful for Michael Gnat and his truly unbelievable patience and precision while copyediting. Thank you to the two anonymous readers who provided succinct and very necessary feedback. The photos interspersed throughout the book appear thanks to the generosity of Thomas Aurin, David Baltzer,

Sonja Gehrke, and Hans Jörg Michel. Matt Cornish's sage advice and exhaustive knowledge of the German theater panorama improved this manuscript (and other projects) in innumerable ways along much of its journey. And for very early guidance and encouragement down a road whose undulating path I never could have foreseen, thank you to Lydia Goehr, Julie Stone Peters, Martin Puchner, and Randall Stevenson.

I also want to acknowledge the editors and publishers of journals who gave me the opportunity to refine some of the ideas included in this book. The introduction was developed in part from an article titled "Putting Policy into Performance Studies?" that was published in *Performance Research* 20, no. 4 (2015): 104–11, doi:10.1080/13528165.2015.1071047. Likewise, sections of chapter 2 appeared in "Frank Castorf's Art of Institutional Dis/avowal: A Volksbühne Elegy," *Theatre Survey* 59, no. 2 (2018): 249–64, reprinted here with permission.

At every turn, and on many different levels, I was so very lucky to assemble the most loving multitude of caregivers, supporters, inspirations, and friends who became family. This growing group of saving graces attended more than generously, from near and far, to so many needs, wishes, and dreams. I live in gratitude for each and every sofa, smile, space, thought, concern, cash infusion, song, meal, beer, ear, whiskey, hug, and so much more.

From my time in the Bay Area, I feel so very fortunate for Sima Belmar, Marc Boucai, Brandon Chalk, Jonathan Combs-Schilling, Kristin Dickinson, Kate Duffly, Stefano Gargiulo, Amy Ruth Hale, Bernhard Haux, Chris Hebdon, Beth Hoffmann, Lasse Landt, Ariel Osterweis, Nina Billone Prieur, Kelly Rafferty, April Sizemore-Barber, Joanne Taylor, Alfie Turnshek-Goins, and Scott Wallin, as well as Larry Bogad, Mandy Cohen, Alex Dubilet, Ashley Ferro-Murray, Jessie Hock, Danny Marcus, Caitlin Marshall, Jessica Smith, Morgan Wadsworth-Boyle, and the rest of the tactical comobilizers behind UCMeP.

In Berlin, I could never have dreamed of being taken in, even adopted, by Abby Anderton, Jashen Edwards, Paul Flaig, Alberto di Gennero, Janek Jonas, Joy Kristin Kalu, Tina Kettering, Benjamin Kiesewetter, Dagi Kiesewetter, Johanna Kiesewetter, Marcela Knapp, Deborah Metternich, Moshe Perlstein, Carolin Philipp, Jan Philipp, Jonas von Poser, Carina Sarstedt, Jan Strobl, Martin Urmann, Katrin Wächter, Hans Zwemke, and all of those who filtered in and through that alternative reality that was SHAKESPEARE IM PARK BERLIN.

In New York (across the years), I owe more than a great deal to Faraaz Ahmed, Frank Angones, Tal Beery, Nicole Bryant, Phil Coakley, Lee Sunday Evans, Adam Gidwitz, Neal Gruer, Eden Kasle, Julia Kelly, Dan Kluger, Andrew Lyman, Jess Mezei, Adam Mitchinson, Ronit Muszkatblit, Sean Nuttall, Nick Renart, Jacob Silberstein, Betty Springer, Scott Statland, Kathryn Struthers, Andrea Timpone, Cody Upton, Anja Westray, and Nick Westray. I am also deeply indebted to the communities of the Drama League, LABA:

A Laboratory for Jewish Culture, University Settlement, and Target Margin Theater, who have welcomed my artistic explorations into their spaces.

And for loving friendship, collaboration, inspiration, heartfelt criticism, and awakening that extended in, through, and beyond this manuscript in ways that exceeded my wildest imagination, I will never be able to offer enough thanks to Katrin Beushausen, Shane Boyle, Maxwell Flaum, Ben Gassman, Dennis Johannßen, Sylvie Levine, Lauren Mancia, David Max, Peter Remmers, and Stew.

For my family, too, there are not enough words. I am so grateful to have been welcomed with such acceptance to join the ranks of Familie Lorenz (Ulla, Sven, Leonard, and Henri), Familie Keppler (Anja, Sven, Junia, and Maja), and Familie Petereit-Ludwig (Tanja, Christoph, Emma, Hannah, and Jonna). I have so much love, appreciation, and gratitude for my mom, Ivy Woolf Turk; my dad, Louis Woolf; Richard Turk, Amanda Turk, Josh Turk, Bobbi Perlowin, Merrie Bernstein, Eric Bernstein, Karen Present, Alison Weinflash, and my superhero sister, Kelly Woolf. Tina Petereit, my wife and my partner, I just hope you know how much I *schätze* your love, laughs, patience, and enduring commitment to coconspiring A.Z. And to our daughter, Thalia, your musings and light fill my days.

Introduction



Arts of Institutional Dis/avowal

Putting Performance into Policy Studies

Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well.
—Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture and Administration” (1959)

Who would’ve thought that in the 21st century the fate of a theater could trigger a public policy debate?
—Evelyn Annuss, “On the Future of the Volksbühne—
Failure Is an Option” (2018)

July 20, 2017. The air was thick with anticipation. A caper was afoot. My friend Katrin and I ate our dinners quickly. We pushed our bicycles through Berlin’s Mitte neighborhood toward the Volksbühne theater on historic Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. I had it on good authority that an occupation was planned. As we approached the immense building, however, things looked quiet. And quite strange. The massive iron Robber Wheel, or *Räuberrad*, that bedecked the theater’s front lawn since 1994 had been removed in protest a few weeks earlier. For the past twenty-five years, this sculpture had served as an insignia and metaphorical calling card for knaves, tricksters, and thieves of all sorts to make themselves at home at the Volksbühne. Under the impassioned leadership of East German enfant terrible Frank Castorf, this people’s stage proffered a consistent challenge for a new generation of artists and audiences alike to rethink the theater’s social function in reunified Germany. But the Castorf era came to an unexpected end: it was announced in 2015 that Chris Dercon, a curator at London’s Tate Modern museum, would be the Volksbühne’s new director as of September 2017. No one could have predicted that this “confused”¹ policy decision would provoke such an explosive scandal. Recent weeks leading up to the end of the 2016–17 season were filled with a dramatic hubbub of activity, day and night: standing-room-only showings of repertoire mainstays, protests against the new administration, international headlines, emotional goodbyes, widespread lamentations of a broken cultural policy system, a healthy dose of nostalgia, and wild

celebration. But tonight, there were no crowds. The lights were dim. And a detail of security guards patrolled the premises.

Surprised to see these men in uniform outside the theater, Katrin and I debated whether we should spark up a conversation with one of them. He looked rather bored, and as there was nothing doing, we walked over and said hello. The guard told us he was part of a private security service hired by the theater to be on alert in case anyone tried to enter the historic building without permission. If so, he and his colleagues had been instructed to call the police. They were on particularly high alert this evening because—so he had heard—an occupation had been announced on the internet. With typical Prussian brusqueness and a thick *Berliner Schnauze* dialect, he explained that he found the entire situation a bit comical. Apparently, there was some hoopla among people who worked at the theater. Some folks were set to lose their jobs under the new leadership. Others were nervous about the prospect of outsiders occupying the space. He giggled at the thought of protesters leaving piles of shit on the doorstep of the theater to show their disdain and disappointment. And he found it utterly ridiculous that anyone would openly announce plans for an occupation online. But he didn't mind the work, he said. He had been out of a job the previous week. And he was happy to have one this week.

As I write these paragraphs a few years later, I am still struck by this encounter. My central task in the pages that follow is to investigate theater's changing role in a changing society by examining intersections of performance and policy. Indeed, one of the broader claims I make is that theater and performance provide us with means—artistic, theoretical, political—to reimagine institutions of public life. And yet as the above anecdote makes clear, as soon as a member of public life is thrown—perhaps unwittingly—into conversations about cultural policy, something feels askew. There is something grounding—humbling even—about a perspective that couldn't care less about the dramatic intrigues that constitute much of this book. The security guard's perspective from the literal front lines serves as a kind of limit or check on my own propensity (some of the protagonists of this book might call it an *American* propensity) for naive optimism. Indeed, the theater is a place of work. And that work has become increasingly precarious in Berlin and beyond. This anecdote serves as a reminder that as much as this book looks to the theater as a space and practice of possibility, we must also—at the same time—reckon with it as a site of that possibility's foreclosure.

The Dercon Debacle

In the end, there was no occupation that evening. As it turned out, members of the theater's technical team objected to plans for a July occupation. They were too tired after the weeks of closing Castorf festivities, and though many



The Robber Wheel (*Räuberrad*) on June 20, 2017, ten days before it was removed in protest against the new Dercon administration. Photograph copyright © Brandon Woolf.

were openly against Dercon's appointment, they could not support an occupation that would keep the theater open into the summer months. It would be their responsibility to stay in the building, make sure it was safe, and prevent damage. They just weren't prepared to work (for free) during their much-needed holiday.² The occupation would have to be delayed—until September 22, when the Volksbühne was occupied by a broad coalition of artists, activists, students, scholars, employees of the theater, longtime fans, and other community members. Explicitly calling their action an act of interdisciplinary performance, over the next six days the occupiers sought to rework the space of the theater. By critically reactivating the massive public infrastructure of the Volksbühne—making use of every room in the building—their occupation sought to perform modes of collaborative institutionality aimed precisely at addressing and urgently rethinking just how public culture might be organized differently in Germany. The idea, according to Sarah Waterfeld, one of the organizers, was to “collectively develop a new concept for the state-subsidized stage that could be transferable to other spheres.”³

What were they protesting specifically? On the one hand, the occupation was perhaps the most visible instantiation of a massive public controversy—and in some cases panic—over Chris Dercon's appointment as successor to Frank Castorf. Many critics saw the selection of a London-based museum curator as director of an experimental Berlin theater, with radical left leanings

to boot, as a “flagrant violation”⁴ of the Volksbühne’s iconic aesthetic and political identity. Other critics saw Dercon’s appointment as an even broader attack on, and “systemic crisis”⁵ for, the German theatrical landscape writ large. Is the German-speaking world, they asked, still committed to maintaining its unique albeit highly costly theater system—grounded historically in large ensembles, extensive repertoires, and full-fledged state support?⁶ Or has the time come for the German theater to justify its activities economically and compete in an innovation-based global network of private and third-sector-driven creative industries? Must Germany, in other words, embrace the trend toward fewer production facilities in exchange for a growing number of touring and guest performance venues?⁷

Chris Dercon’s answer: yes, absolutely. Even though Berlin already has a number of these kinds of presenting houses, Dercon’s concept for the “new” Volksbühne was a complete reorientation of the German *Staatstheater*, or state-stage. No more ensemble. No more repertoire. No more *Intendant*, or artistic director responsible for maintaining the unique artistic vision of the house *and* directing on its stage. Instead the theater would become a project-based platform for an international lineup of interdisciplinary guest artists, a revolving door of en-suite productions curated by a committee of “experts.” Text-based drama and theater were almost entirely eliminated from Dercon’s proposed program and subsumed by a range of high-profile dance, installation, participatory, and digital performance works. Indeed, Dercon expressed his disdain for the tradition of auteurist German *Regietheater*, or director’s theater, of which the Volksbühne is emblematic: “I just cannot stand to see Macbeth wearing Burberry, eating *Buletten* [Berlin-style meatballs], and drinking a glass of vodka. I mean, it has nothing to do with theater. If that is theater, then I can’t stand it. I really can’t stand it. I get an allergy.”⁸

Central to Dercon’s vision was an expansion of the new Volksbühne brand beyond the Mitte neighborhood in which it is located through the activation of two former aircraft hangers at the historic Tempelhof airfield in south-central Berlin. This enormous new multidisciplinary exhibition and performance hall, which Dercon claimed would secure Berlin as a global cultural metropolis, fit neatly with the larger urban planning initiatives of Berlin’s incumbent mayor, Michael Müller. Berlin should no longer be a “poor, but sexy” center for modern bohemians—per the ironic slogan coined in 2003 by its former mayor, Klaus Wowereit. Rather, Müller wanted to establish a new urban center for creative industries, and Dercon’s expansion of the Volksbühne into the not-yet-gentrified district around Tempelhof could begin a twenty-year process of profitable urban development: “Art as Social Work and City-Making,” as Dercon put it.⁹ The final step of Dercon’s reorientation of the state-stage was economic. Since Berlin’s public coffers couldn’t accommodate the additional five million euros per year Dercon required, he planned to secure adequate funds through corporate sponsorships and commercial rentals.¹⁰

For those of us based in the United States—whose jaws might drop at the very thought of a robust system of centralized funding for the arts—the demand that theater institutions justify their bottom lines and secure always-limited funds from any source possible is rather standard. The US performance economy knows very little about ensemble, about repertoire, about coordinated cultural policy programs at the municipal, state, and federal levels. But in Germany, this particular brand of institutional disavowal, so eager to rethink “big” government and its long-standing swath of accompanying infrastructures of support in the arts sector for a more flexible model, is still highly controversial in many camps. Indeed, in Germany, *Kulturpolitik*—and the often-tenuous relationships between state and market, between modes of social organization and artistic production that it encompasses—is still very much up for debate. For many of the Volksbühne’s proponents, the Tate Modern—a colonial-era power plant turned corporate tourist attraction—was a terrifying adversary most unwelcome in Berlin. Dercon knew full well his proposals would cause a stir.¹¹ And they did. Preceding the theater’s occupation, the outcry in print and social media was immense. Many stalwarts of the German theater lamented that someone who lacked theater experience—or even any real interest in the theater—would transform perhaps Germany’s most important state-stage into an empty “event-shed.”¹² Two hundred staff members, freelance artists, and technicians affiliated with the Volksbühne published an open letter stating their lack of confidence—and worries that most of their jobs would be made redundant.¹³ What use is there after all for builders, designers, and makeup artists if the season consists of an ever-changing lineup of guest performances produced elsewhere? This letter was followed by an online petition—which garnered more than forty thousand signatures—criticizing Dercon’s appointment as an “inappropriate top-down decision” made by party politicians behind closed doors without public support.¹⁴ And when heaps of feces began to be delivered daily in front of his office, Dercon questioned whether he should consider leaving Berlin.¹⁵

While much of the anti-Dercon rhetoric remained theater-centric at first, it quickly became clear that the criticism was aimed at something much broader: the future of Berlin. As the occupiers asked in their online invitation—which the security guard rather glibly mocked—“In what kind of city do we want to live? Under what circumstances do we want to work? . . . Who will we allow to determine our lives? The theater has become a symbol of urban development.”¹⁶ Indeed, in the long wake of German reunification, Berlin emerged, now quite famously, as a paradise for the “weird and wacky,”¹⁷ as “Europe’s Capital of Cool.”¹⁸ Since living was cheap—as the city had not yet undergone the postindustrial transformations of other European capitals—Berlin became an offbeat mecca for a lively, postpunk subculture.¹⁹ At the same time, tourism boomed beyond the wildest of expectations,²⁰ and an influx of mobile young urban creatives, or Yuccies,²¹ cemented Berlin as a center of unbridled energy for a “new spirited”²² start-up culture—with English as the

dominant language. As Peter Boenisch notes, since the 2008 financial crisis, the split between these two groups has grown increasingly present—and divisive.²³ To make matters more contentious, building has boomed, and many apartments have been renovated by international developers and are being rented through Airbnb, or sold with high price tags to investors from around the globe. As a result, gentrification hit big—particularly in the areas of Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg around the Volksbühne. Whereas these were some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city in the 1990s, they are now Berlin’s most expensive districts.²⁴ Very much in line with these developments, Berlin has solidified its standing as a coveted zone of artistic “freedom” for an international jet set of art-world elites—many of whom have fled other cultural hubs and taken up residence in what is now considered the “new” Paris, the “new” London, the “new” New York. According to Klaus Biesenbach, former director of New York’s MoMA PS1, Berlin is “the most liberal, artist-friendly place I have ever been.”²⁵

Although he strongly objects to being labeled a *neoliberal*,²⁶ Dercon’s new Volksbühne made productive use of just this kind of language: he jettisoned the politically charged “am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz” from the theater’s name and inaugurated in its place a “theater without borders” that “reflect[s] on the contemporary,” in which “artists from Berlin, Europe and the world are invited to contribute to an ever-evolving urban society” in order to promote a “vision of an open, cosmopolitan community.”²⁷ Less generously stated, as Sven Lütticken recapitulated the occupiers’ critique, Dercon inaugurated a brand of “homogenized global art-in-general that . . . serve[d] the city’s event-culture—rather than serving the city’s residents and reflecting the fundamental hybridity for which the Volksbühne is known.”²⁸ With their occupation, the activist performance artists sought, so they claimed, to establish “free spaces” and “collective structures” based on “respectful coexistence, acceptance and tolerance”: “We are not the Berlin of city marketing, investment incentives, performance rivalry, of social marginalization, of deportations and gentrification.”²⁹ In other words, the occupiers sought to perform a very different mode of “Art as Social Work and City-Making.” The plan, according to Sarah Waterfeld, was to present an open, heterogenous, and ever-expanding program of performance works in each room of the theater, accompanied by public discussions about how the theater should be collectively organized and administered going forward. More than three thousand people helped organize the action in advance, and during the six-day occupation thousands more moved through the space in the hope of collectively creating new “spaces of possibility.”³⁰ The priorities of Dercon’s “open, cosmopolitan community” became clear, however, when on September 28, a squadron of over fifty riot-clad police officers arrived to clear the theater forcefully at the behest of the Berlin city government.

We see, then, that the extended outcries over and actions against Chris Dercon and his proposals for a new Volksbühne were much more than a



Occupation of the Volksbühne, September 2017. Photograph copyright © David Baltzer / bildbuehne.de.



Co-organizer Sarah Waterfeld during the Volksbühne occupation, September 2017. Photograph copyright © David Baltzer / bildbuehne.de.

quibble about the aesthetic proclivities of a new theater director. Indeed, the Dercon debates extend way beyond the Volksbühne's stage and call into question the priorities of Berlin's cultural policy. As Dercon himself explained, "The rage has less to do with me personally than with the state of theater today, and its future. Of course, German theater is very important, but the audience, the public, has changed. Berlin today is a cosmopolitan city, and to come to terms with this fact is not easy for the German theater."³¹ *Institutional Theatrics* tracks both the challenges and opportunities of this coming to terms in the decades since German reunification. This book examines the steady proliferation over the past thirty years of agendas to disavow and even dismantle the long-standing tradition of state-subsidized theater in Berlin, even as the German capital worked to redefine itself as a global arts epicenter. I claim that these varied stages of disavowal—these crises of cultural policy—provoked a range of performative arts of dis/avowal on and off the stage that worked to forge new relations between performance and the institutions that house it. By focusing on the restructuring of Berlin's major public theater infrastructures as well as the interdisciplinary performance practices that responded to these shifts, I argue that cultural policy must be thought of as a performative practice of infrastructural imagining, not just as an administrative agenda for divvying and delegating funds. Furthermore, understanding performance as itself a form of policy can help us understand the ways artists engage systems of state support as the means of enacting their undoing.

Theater in Crisis in Post-Wall Berlin

Despite the great fervor of the most recent Volksbühne controversy, public debate about the state of the state-stage has a long institutional history in Berlin. I begin with the recent Dercon debates in order to emphasize that many of the questions that constitute contemporary cultural policy discourse first emerged after the fall of the Wall, as Berlin was thrust (and thrust itself) into a new era. Throughout the Cold War, on both sides of the Wall, legislators, arts administrators, and artists across both Germanys maintained dogged commitments to national traditions of public support for the arts. As Traute Schölling explains, "Regardless of their antithetical socio-political structures and ideological aims during the previous forty years, both states were committed to a common German tradition: the responsibility of the state to support culture."³² Theater subsidies in the formerly western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) were higher per capita than any other country in the world.³³ Centralized support for the theater in the formerly eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR) was also quite substantial.³⁴ Accordingly, the reunification treaty, signed in August 1990, made an explicit commitment to maintaining the continuity of cultural life in the newly unified nation,

committed in other words to the continued relevance of the German *Kulturstaat*, or Culture State—with a capital “C.”³⁵ Article 35 of the treaty read:

During the years of division, art and culture were—despite differing developments in the two German states—a basis for the ongoing unity of the German nation. They represent an independent and indispensable contribution to the process of German state unity on the road to European integration. A united Germany’s position and prestige in the world depends not only on its political weight and economic achievements, but also on its importance as a cultural nation. . . . The fulfillment of cultural tasks, including the financing, must be secured in such a way that the protection and support of culture and art falls to the new states and cities according to the division of responsibilities defined by the Constitution. . . . To compensate for the consequences of Germany’s division, the Federal government may help finance in the transition individual cultural projects and institutions in order to maintain the cultural infrastructure.³⁶

This explicit legislative commitment proved harder than expected to maintain. According to the West German constitution, or *Grundgesetz*, approved in 1949—and amended to include East Germany in 1990—the individual German states were responsible for subsidizing art and culture.³⁷ In line with the agreement to fold the former GDR into the West German system, the responsibilities of all formerly East German cultural institutions passed from the central government to the newly formed state governments. Reunification proved incredibly expensive, however, and the German states—especially those in the East—faced enormous deficits and major unemployment in the years after reunification, brought on by the largest economic recession since the 1970s.³⁸ Anticipating the potential lack of funds to support the expanded cultural sphere, the new federal government committed to a temporary sum of transitional and explicitly federal subsidies: in 1991, the commitment was for 900 million DM for the preservation and promotion of culture; this sum decreased each year until the federal aid expired at the end of 1994.³⁹ This federal commitment ultimately proved inadequate to ameliorate the rising deficits and infrastructural uncertainty that ensued—in the arts landscape and beyond.

Due to its unique status as city, state, and future capital of the new German nation, Berlin became the focus of much cultural political attention. Berlin, 1989, was a city wrought with the weight of twentieth-century Europe: a metropolis long divided, working to reinvent itself explicitly as the center of the reunified *Kulturstaat*, as literal and symbolic meeting point of East and West. Though Berlin received some additional funding from the temporary federal fund due to its exceptional status, the newly reunified city found itself responsible almost overnight for an unprecedented number of

state-funded cultural institutions from the East and the West, an overabundance that was particularly pronounced in the performing arts. From the former West: the Deutsche Oper (and Ballet), Theater des Westens, Staatliche Schauspielbühnen (or State-Stage Complex, which included the Schiller Theater, Schlosspark Theater, and Studio Theater), Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, and Freie Volksbühne, in addition to the partially subsidized Grips and Hebbel Theaters. From the former East: the Staatsoper and Komische Oper (both with their own ballet troupes), Metropol-Theater, Friedrichstadtpalast, Deutsches Theater (and Kammerspiele), Berliner Ensemble, Maxim Gorki Theater, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Kabarett-Theater Distel, Theater der Freundschaft, Staatliches Puppentheater, and the Theater in the basement of the recently closed Palast der Republik, the East Berlin community center and seat of the former East German Parliament.

To make matters more complicated, the city's rapidly changing arts landscape was also mediated by an emerging agenda of (nascently) neoliberal urban development, supported by the party politics of Berlin's Grand Coalition government, which catalyzed a slew of heated cultural policy controversies about the future of the state-subsidized arts, with an intense focus on Berlin's pressing theater situation. In the immediate context of reunification, cultural political authorities working on behalf of the Grand Coalition launched a sustained critique of the state-stage's infrastructural stagnation. They argued that state support and enduring security facilitated intransigent inflexibility, bureaucratic malaise, and an abuse of privilege through rapidly expanding administrative and technical apparatuses and outdated federal and municipal budgetary laws. In the interest of creativity, then, austerity was deemed necessary to relieve the city of its high cultural expenditures by transitioning toward private initiatives attuned to the benefits of a consumer-oriented theater model and a commercially driven box office.

There was a first round of debates, cutbacks, and administrative adjustments in the early months of 1990. But the ensuing years of what many have since labeled the first Berlin "theater crisis"⁴⁰ saw a series of truly dramatic shifts: the dismantling of a number of long-standing theater institutions, the advent of new institutions, and the refashioning of older institutions with new purposes and orientations—both aesthetic and political. These institutional transformations were also the sites of and catalysts for Berlin's reemergence as a vibrant center of experimental theater and performance over the next thirty years. *Institutional Theatrics* examines this extended period of precarious adjustment of, at, and in the theater—this "coming to terms"—in order to provide critical traction to the complex operations of *performing arts policy*.⁴¹ In a series of case studies of performance as institutional analysis, the book traces the fraught history of a Berlin caught uncomfortably between the shrinking welfare state theater and the emergence of an "alternative" ethos of self-administering and project-based creativity. In other words, the book historicizes the conditions of possibility for the most recent theater crisis at

the Volksbühne by tracking an extended set of performance-based responses to a persistent set of policy questions: in a city struggling to determine just how neoliberal it can afford to be, what kinds of performing arts practices and institutions are necessary—and why?

To address these questions, *Institutional Theatrics* charts an approach for thinking in new ways about the relations between art and the infrastructures of its support. The central methodological argument of the book is that aesthetic formations cannot be separated from institutional and broader social formations. Indeed, I argue that formal experimentation, both onstage and off, is a vital strategy for making sense of theater in imminent crisis. In the specific context of German theater studies, or *Theaterwissenschaft*, my attention to the successive crises in Berlin responds directly to recent calls by both Christopher Balme and Peter Boenisch for “institutional dramaturgies”⁴² committed to a “sharper institutional dimension of theater research and analysis in order to better understand the changing role and cultural relevance of theater in present-day (Western) Europe.”⁴³ Further, my focus on policy expands upon recent efforts to unsettle an anti-institutional prejudice that has haunted theater and performance studies.⁴⁴

In the next section, I explicate the ways my notion of *institutional dis/avowal* is implicitly embedded in a history of contentious conversations about culture and administration. As my rather polemical subtitle to this introduction suggests, I enter these discussions by revisiting another set of cultural policy debates that arose in the annals of cultural studies also in the 1990s. I argue that Tony Bennett’s controversial claim—that we *put* policy into cultural studies—unintentionally invites us to examine how “policy” itself continues to serve as a generative term to unravel binarizing and suffocating logics of state subsidy versus neoliberal reform, bureaucracy versus flexibility, overabundance versus austerity, artistic freedom versus, well, artistic freedom. By tracking a critical genealogy of these so-called policy debates, I contend also that we move beyond a mere acknowledgment—or avowal—that arts of institutional thinking are essential in and for theater and performance studies. Indeed, the conceptual framework of institutional dis/avowal takes seriously the seemingly paradoxical circumstance in which artists who receive public support make use of it to avow the administrations that govern while simultaneously performing their transformation. This methodological examination of artistic critique as institutional overhaul sets the stage for the complex intersections of performance and policy in post-Wall Berlin.

Staging the Cultural Policy Debates

In April 1990, an international crowd of almost a thousand scholars gathered for a weekend-long conference at the University of Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign. Among those poised to present papers that weekend was Tony Bennett, whose provocative policy polemic would raise eyebrows. Indeed, Bennett's "Putting Policy into Cultural Studies" catalyzed a set of heated cultural policy debates that polarized interdisciplines in the critical humanities for years to come.⁴⁵ As Bennett explained, he was interested in a radical reappraisal of the underlying theories and political orientations of cultural studies. Specifically, Bennett took issue with the preponderance of neo-Gramscian thinking, which, so he claimed, committed a generation of scholars to "too automatic a politics" and a romance of resistance indifferent to the specific institutional conditions that give rise to particular kinds of political situations and "regulate different fields of culture."⁴⁶ Instead, Bennett called for an explicitly pragmatic agenda for cultural studies—one that, in his most sardonic articulation, insists that we abandon the "heady skirmishing with postmodernism" and the "sleuth-like searching for subversive practices just where you'd least expect to find them."⁴⁷ In Toby Miller's more reserved recapitulation, Bennett called upon those he termed "left" cultural theorists to abandon their penchants for "public resistance in favor of a more measurable and measured influence inside the apparatuses of the state."⁴⁸

In Bennett's admittedly idiosyncratic view, Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality demanded "a revised understanding of the relations between civil society, culture and the state which allows culture its autonomous spheres and forms of action."⁴⁹ Unlike Gramsci's centralized flows of hegemonic ideology, says Bennett, Foucault does not rely on a notion of centralized power. Rather, governmentality is characterized by a diversity of means of social management that exceed state action. Culture, Bennett insists, is one of those regulating technologies that shapes social relations and organizes human conduct.⁵⁰ Culture is, in a certain sense, already cultural policy. For this reason, Bennett suggests that "an engagement with policy issues needs to be seen as a central component of the practical concerns of cultural studies."⁵¹ Further, he stresses that a policy-oriented cultural studies would "begin to think [of] the possibility of a politics which might take the form of an administrative program, and so to think also of a type of cultural studies that will aim to produce knowledges that can assist in the development of such programs rather than endlessly contrive to organize subjects which exist only as the phantom effects of its own rhetorics."⁵²

Bennett's proclivity for disciplinary institutions and administrative programs—in addition to his flagrant diatribe against the "contrived appearance of ineffable complexity"⁵³ that, in his mind, characterizes much social theory—evoked strong reactions. Even if one were compelled by Bennett's particular reading of Foucault, why should cultural studies become cultural policy studies *a priori*? Why should cultural critics become bureaucrats? Fredric Jameson was only the first to excoriate Bennett for his "anti-intellectualism," his "obscene . . . proposals," his "misplaced advice," his "remarkably misleading" tone, and his overall "ignorance."⁵⁴ What followed were years of

adamant debate, resulting often in the most starkly polarized positions: policy versus cultural criticism, top-down versus bottom-up practices, reformist versus revolutionary politics, and contextualist versus textualist emphases.

In a peculiar turn, this was also the criticism that Bennett himself hurled back at debate participants in his book-length intervention in 1998. Surprisingly—and without much explanation—Bennett condemned his many “real and substantial”⁵⁵ critics for their own propensities toward binary thinking and their failure to demonstrate adequately a more productive permeability between policy and critique. Although he continued to lament the “serious . . . blockages to an adequate engagement, both theoretical and practical, with the horizons of policy,”⁵⁶ Bennett suddenly dashed the air of exclusivity, of strict either-or, from his vocabulary and hinted instead that there must be a mutual imbrication of seemingly contradictory perspectives—although he provided little methodological help. In an even more unusual move, Bennett claimed that the penchant for polarity on the part of his critics—and perhaps himself—was in fact an extension of, and could therefore be blamed on, Theodor W. Adorno’s infamous meditations on the inherently “contradictory tensions between culture and administration”⁵⁷ from his 1959 radio lecture of the same title—with which I began this chapter. Bennett accused Adorno of first formulating and then sustaining the irreconcilable antinomies that came to constitute, as Oliver Bennett put it later, the “torn halves of cultural policy research.”⁵⁸

Tony Bennett’s invocation of Adorno is powerful precisely for its productive misreading. Indeed, Adorno’s analysis provides the very tools necessary to unsettle the overwhelmingly stagnant binaries that Bennett accuses him of fixing in the public imaginary. Rather than explicating an impenetrable set of opposites, Adorno’s mode of negative dialectical argument provides methodological insight into the ways a more *critical* policy studies could—and should—explore the nuanced entanglements of policy and critique that Bennett and many of his critics failed to demonstrate. Further, Adorno begins to articulate the radically different kinds of institutional practices and programs enabled by embracing such tendentious interdependencies.

Bennett focuses the bulk of his critical attention on a later moment in “Culture and Administration” in which Adorno “opens a perspective for the protection of cultural matters from the realm of control by the market,” by turning to the “ignominious figure of the expert”⁵⁹ as a potential foil to the reified logics of administration that, for him, constitute the culture industry. In his attempt to imagine what kinds of historical actors may advocate for this perspective, Adorno postulates a Benjaminian critic “whose task it is to uphold the interest of the public against the public itself.”⁶⁰ Here Bennett digs in his heels, as he has little patience for what he considers to be Adorno’s blatantly elitist commitment to “men of insight,”⁶¹ to the “aesthetic personality who alone is able to act in the sphere of administration in the name of values which exceed it, a lonely historical actor destined to be lacerated by the contradictions he seeks to quell in culture’s favour.”⁶²

It is a shame, however, that Bennett pays almost no attention to Adorno's broader discussion about the nature of policy itself. Although Adorno's "expert" language and its classed, raced, gendered, and abled entailments are troubling, his unfortunate wording does not pervade the essay in its entirety, nor does it theoretically exclude more radically inclusive formulations. Committed to his negative methodology, Adorno does not posit a lone elitist who proceeds from a "position of transcendence in relation to its object."⁶³ Rather, Adorno's critic must critique, even protest against, those most pervasive institutions, just as they reflect the institution's "objective substance."⁶⁴ Elsewhere, Adorno remains open about the kinds of critics and the arts of critique that may prove useful in exposing the ways culture and administration enact their own interdependence. Indeed, Adorno works consistently to demonstrate how a more critical cultural policy can only be thought immanently from within the very material and always heteronomous ranks of the publics in which it is invested. He insists, "Cultural policy would not misunderstand itself as godwilled; it would not blindly endorse faith in culture, blind to its entanglement with the social totality—and for that very reason truly entangled—it would find a parallel in the negative naiveté involved in accepting administration as faith."⁶⁵

Adorno's position is one that *already* accommodates and challenges Bennett's. Adorno is certainly aware of, and dialectically obliged to consider, the most pragmatic horizons of policy, and he takes seriously the suggestion that we begin, as Bennett puts it, "talking to . . . what used to be called the ISAs [ideological state apparatuses] rather than writing them off from the outset."⁶⁶ In the opening half of the essay, Adorno examines how all artists and their modes of production are deeply reliant on the material and financial supports of the varied administrations in which they are enmeshed: "The appeal to the creators of culture to withdraw from the process of administration and keep distant from it has a hollow ring."⁶⁷ Indeed, Adorno obliges himself to interrogate closely a version of Bennett's later claim that "we can now, without regret, treat culture as an industry,"⁶⁸ even if Adorno's version of no regret more closely resembles the "urge to release the safety catch on a revolver."⁶⁹

Even more interesting, however, are the ways that Adorno begins to imagine alternative possibilities for administration itself. He is interested in thinking through, and again dialectically obliged to think through, what cultural policy may entail if it were to exceed increasing normalization—to which Bennett seems to have already subscribed. Adorno is interested further in thinking through what kinds of institutions and administrative programs this different mode of policy may enable. Here he begins to sketch, albeit tentatively, what I call a negative art of institutional dis/avowal. This is a practice or "dialectical idea of absorbing that which is spontaneous and not planned into planning, of creative space for these factors and of a strengthening of their possibilities."⁷⁰ In this moment, Adorno alludes to the ways an

institution might embrace its own determinate negation. He gestures toward an institution that is itself obliged to reckon with the concrete particulars of its own contradictions, to reckon also, in other words, with its own inherent proclivity for spontaneity, processuality, even instability. In a move, then, beyond a unilateral critique of the reified tendencies of administration, and at the same time, in a move beyond the sphere of idealist autonomy that Bennett associates with his thought, Adorno sketches the broader entailments of a critical cultural policy. This alternative institutional orientation—one of dis/avowal—would necessarily attend to the more “pragmatic” considerations of deutsche marks, pfennigs, nuts, and bolts, while *also* proliferating practices and programs that move beyond obduracy or entrenchment and that call urgent attention to the institution’s own inherent penchant for “renounc[ing] itself.”⁷¹

Policy and Performativity

Ten years after Bennett’s inaugural polemic, Toby Miller and George Yúdice shifted the discursive terms of the debates with the publication of their book *Cultural Policy* in 2002. On the one hand, their volume directly challenged Bennett’s dismissal of the “committed norms of cultural studies,”⁷² thus taking up Angela McRobbie’s urgent call for a new cultural policy “agenda”⁷³: “Our book seeks, in other words, to articulate knowledge with progressive social change, with social movements as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. More conventional research articulates knowledge with social reproduction, with governments as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. Whereas our project is concerned with transforming the social order, the alternative seeks to replicate it—a struggle between cultural policy as a transformative versus a functionalist sphere.”⁷⁴ While Miller and Yúdice stress the importance of “committed” scholarship, their project also engages with Bennett by focusing critically on the specific institutional conditions that give rise to particular political situations and regulate different fields of culture. Specifically, they argue that an appraisal of the *performativity* of policy is necessary to account for the complex interplay between the “transformation” and the “replication” of institutional matrices already in place and at work. In his solo project on the increasing *Expediency of Culture*, published just the following year, Yúdice makes a similar claim: “The very term [cultural policy] conjoins what in modernity belonged to emancipation on the one hand, and to regulation on the other.”⁷⁵ In line with his larger argument diagnosing how culture has become a central resource in the globalized, post-Fordist market economy, Yúdice sees policy as a necessary consideration *and* intervention at a time when—as was already the case in Article 35 of the German reunification treaty, for instance—“culture is being invoked to solve problems that previously were the province of economics and politics.”⁷⁶

In place of Adorno's "administration" and Bennett's take on "governmentality," Yúdice describes a performative "field of force generated by differently arranged relations among institutions of the state and civil society, the judiciary, the police, schools and universities, the media, consumer markets, and so on."⁷⁷ The varied national—and sometimes multinational—intersections of these institutional frames compose a performative matrix of comportment and knowledge production. For Miller and Yúdice, then, cultural policy must be conceived in terms of performativity because, in part at least, it is "dedicated to producing subjects via the formation of repeatable styles of conduct, either at the level of the individual or the public."⁷⁸ Cultural policy, they continue, "always implies the management of populations"⁷⁹ through suggested forms of normalized behavior, which have varying degrees of performative force depending on the context, "enjoining [for example] universal adoption of bourgeois manners or stratifying access to cultural and other material resources on the basis of other demographic categorizations."⁸⁰

In his lengthy exposition of Judith Butler's early work, Yúdice also reviews how her theory of performativity was devised precisely to contest these constraining frames. He recapitulates the ways in which her politics of "disidentity" emerges from and plays within the sovereign aims and representations of the institutional regimes of power, discourse, and culture. Here, however, Yúdice raises his most fundamental objection. Questioning the efficacy of Butler's theory, he asks just how she proposes actually to confound those most powerful and normalizing institutions. "Deconstructive analyses . . . work quite well for texts but seem powerless before the operations of the institutions that exert regulatory force over texts."⁸¹ He continues:

Butler's contention that the "turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition," . . . has yet to be elucidated at the level of institutions and their effects. . . . To the degree that Butler imagines "democracy" . . . to inhere in such forms of gender trouble, and more generally, cultural trouble, she is caught up in the very fantasy that she aims to elucidate.⁸²

For Yúdice, cultural expression is by no means a sufficient strategy against the ubiquitous condemnation to perform. In an age of expedience, in which culture functions as a technology of biopower on a global scale, "there is little to be gained by deploying identity or disidentity if there is no juridical or other institutional uptake."⁸³

For this reason, Miller and Yúdice turn to policy as a means of both participating in and intervening in culture. In one of his clearest articulations of the importance of this kind of explicitly institution-based thinking, Yúdice explains (albeit in the form of a disclaimer): "It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate on the premise that there is no outside of institutionality

and that it will not do to expect an external force—the real—to solve the problems of an institutionally bound practice.”⁸⁴ To work against the institution, in other words, is “another way of allowing that institution to frame the understanding of the practice and to seek to incorporate it.”⁸⁵ Instead—and this is the methodology Yúdice invokes in his book’s final chapter on the international inSITE triennial festival—it is necessary to understand, and to critique discursively, the inner workings of the institutional matrices that enable or performatively shape acts of culture. But in addition to this understanding, Yúdice claims that it is also essential to embrace, work for, and participate in the institution itself in an effort to modify it from within:

inSITE . . . makes visible and palpable how the cultural economy functions. But what do we do once we see how it functions? Critique of this venue will not produce the disalienating effects believed to ensue from the uncovering of ideological structures and processes characteristic of ideology critique. Nor will we get in touch with our phenomenological body or have a limit experience. What inSITE calls for, in my view, is to become a user, a *collaborator* who intervenes in order to have the labor expended recognized and compensated. Venues like inSITE become important sites for the reformulation of cultural policy in a post-Fordist, globalizing world, not from the vantage point of a government agency, foundation or university office, but by engaging as an archaeologist-practitioner in the process.⁸⁶

Yúdice insists that we understand arts institutions like inSITE as complex systems of laboring bodies and infrastructural supports. And the task of a critical policy practice is both to expose the supporting structures upon which those bodies depend to do the kind of work they do *and* to engage those supports on behalf of the workers who make them possible.

For some critics, Miller and Yúdice end up sounding more like Tony Bennett and less like Judith Butler than perhaps anticipated. Peter Osborne, for example, is frustrated with what he reads as Miller and Yúdice’s resigned endorsement of “actually existing politics” and accompanying reduction of policy to an advocacy program for better working conditions. “How,” Osborne laments, “did the path that Yúdice and others set out on in their desire for a cultural studies linked to a transformative left populism come to terminate in the sorry state of a cultural theory dedicated to legitimating an emergent political-administrative status quo?”⁸⁷

My sense, however, is that Osborne oversimplifies Miller and Yúdice’s analysis, which, in certain moments, is interested in more than a simple avowal of the way things are. “Cultural policy,” they claim, “refers to the institutional supports that channel both aesthetic creativity and collective ways of life.”⁸⁸ And while policy is often associated with highly deliberate

and determined institutional practices, they explain that it is also “often made unwittingly, through the permeation of social space by genres that invoke ‘a particular kind of organization of audience’ that may maintain or modify ideological systems . . . on an *ad hoc*, inconsistent basis.”⁸⁹ In this iteration, which seems to glance in Adorno’s direction, policy is not a completely bound and determined activity. Rather, it is also something that can happen in action, inadvertently, “‘on the run,’ in response to unpredictable pressures.”⁹⁰ It is a practice of participation and intervention within the institution that is uniquely poised to help participants rethink how the institution itself is organized. The performativity of policy, then, also becomes an enabling paradigm, one that takes hold institutionally and—at least potentially—performs a negative mode of dis/avowal.

Interestingly, while Miller and Yúdice are critical of Butler for her presumed lack of institutional uptake, these more Adornian moments in their meditations on policy begin to sound something like Butler’s own recent recontextualizations of her performativity theory from the perspective of contemporary social movements. In this newer writing, Butler draws explicit connections between her earlier work on gender and her subsequent work on precarity. “If performativity was considered linguistic,” Butler asks, “how do *bodily acts* become performative?”⁹¹ Although she is operating in a context outside the so-called policy debates, Butler makes it quite clear that critics like Miller and Yúdice have misread one of her central interventions by relegating her project to a merely discursive exercise. Butler insists instead that “there can be no reproduction of gendered norms without the bodily enactment of those norms” (31). And elsewhere: “Performativity is not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence” (75). Indeed, for Butler, performativity functions precisely as a mediating term between language and body, both of which—and this is central for her—are interdependent and infrastructurally supported acts:

It is not, then, exclusively or primarily as subjects bearing abstract rights that we take to the streets. We take to the streets because we need to walk or move there; we need streets to be built so that, whether or not we are in a wheelchair, for instance, we can move there, and we can pass through that space without obstruction, harassment, administrative detention, or fear of injury or death. If we are on the streets, it is because we are bodies that require public forms of support to stand and move, and to live a life that matters. (137–38)

It seems, then, that Butler would agree with Miller and Yúdice that there is no outside of institutionality. Indeed, bodies depend upon varied forms of social and institutional support, and this most fundamental state of interdependency comes into highest relief precisely as it is disavowed by the very

infrastructures upon which it relies—for employment, education, healthcare, shelter, mobility, freedom of expression, dare we say art-making. “This produces a quandary,” Butler claims, in an articulation that reminds us also of Adorno’s inescapable yet constitutive tensions: “We cannot act without supports, and yet we must struggle for the supports that allow us to act or, indeed, that are essential components of our action” (72). Here Butler works explicitly to elucidate a contemporary politics of performativity by means of destabilizing acts of institutional dis/avowal. She proposes a practice of “acting together that opens up time and space outside and against the established architecture and temporality of the regime, one that lays claim to materiality, leans into its supports, and draws from its material and technical dimensions to rework their functions” (75). Here Butler also implicitly refunctions Miller and Yúdice’s dialectics of “replication” and “transformation,” of “regulation” and “emancipation,” for now the platform of politics itself is front and center on the policy agenda as neoliberalism “reconfigure[s] what will be public” (75).

Performance as Policy

In a 2012 keynote coperformance at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Butler further recontextualized her thinking in order to reexamine ways that performance itself might be understood as performative. In doing so, Butler explicitly expressed her debt to, or interdependency on, the work of her coperformer, Shannon Jackson, whose ongoing project demonstrates the different ways the interdisciplinary art of performance both relies upon and mobilizes a diverse set of interdependent bodies, objects, and social institutions. In her 2011 book *Social Works*, Jackson enumerates an “infrastructural politics of performance,”⁹² which calls into question a long-standing and widespread “mistrust of ‘structure,’” of institutions, of bureaucracy, and of policy, not only in “neoliberal . . . circles but also [in] avant-garde artistic circles and critical intellectual ones where freedom was increasingly equated with systemic *independence*.”⁹³ Instead, Jackson’s work exposes the complex matrix of interrelated social institutions—both material and immaterial—that enable and also constitute the work of performance. As Butler explained at MoMA, “I take from Shannon the importance of the following question: how do we understand that mode of performance art that imagines it is without any need of infrastructure in a time when the destruction of social and economic infrastructure seems to be happening all around?”⁹⁴

During the MoMA coperformance, Jackson claimed that she is interested additionally in the ways these acts of critical exposure may also constitute a “performance-based institutional reimagining.”⁹⁵ But once we recognize performance—as I agree we must—as a set of interdependent and infrastructurally supported acts, how are we to understand such practices of

“reimagining”? Jackson’s explicit preference involves modes—or arts—of what she calls “infrastructural avowal”:

I am most interested in social practices that provoke reflection on the non-autonomy of human beings, projects that imagine agency not only as systemic disruption but also as systemic relation. Through social art projects that provoke a reflection on the opportunity and inconvenience of our enmeshment in systems of labour, ecology, able-bodiedness, social welfare, public infrastructure, kinship and more, expanded artworks might induce a kind of “infrastructural avowal,” that is, an acknowledgement of the interdependent systems of support that sustain human beings, even though we often feel constrained by them.⁹⁶

Institutional Theatrics shifts its focus beyond practices that work to induce such acknowledgment. Post-Wall Berlin is exciting—and inspiring—for me because of the preponderance of practices that provoke reflection on the ways performance itself questions, critiques, and even fundamentally challenges the institution *as* its way of acknowledging—of dis/avowing—the interdependence so central to Jackson’s argument. To phrase it differently: in light of the preceding analysis—and especially in light of Butler’s toggling of transformation and replication, of emancipation and regulation, even of disruption and relation—I find myself most drawn to performances that lean on and into systems of support as the *very* means by which they seek to rethink, confound, destabilize, disrupt, even undo them.

Stages of Dis/avowal

In the chapters that follow, I bring these overlapping conversations to bear on the undulating set of institutional avowals and disavowals that constitute the German theater’s “coming to terms” over the past thirty years. Indeed, Butler and Jackson’s reworking of Miller and Yúdice’s reworking of Adorno and Bennett serves as a methodological kernel—or specter—as I explore Berlin-based instances in which performance functions as a performative art of policy. We will see also that these different stages of institutional dis/avowal assume diverse forms (and degrees of “success”), and that they employ very different vocabularies depending on the concrete particulars of the institutional context. For this reason—and this was a methodological priority for me throughout the process of writing—I have endeavored to allow the performance sites themselves to dictate (and produce) the theoretical vocabularies required for their own immanent analysis. Each chapter, then, consults a quite different set of interlocutors from an array of disciplines in order to chart the fundamental imbrications of performance and policy, of art and infrastructure, of stage and state.

Though each of my four central cases engages a particular set of institutions, performance pieces, policy puzzles, and theoretical questions catalyzed by the costly processes of German reunification, the chapters also progress chronologically and build upon one another thematically in order to narrate the dramatic reimagining of Berlin's theater and performance landscape since the end of the Cold War. As a means of demonstrating the book's methodology of conceiving aesthetics and infrastructures, performances and policies together, one chapter in each part narrates a particular policy problematic in order to understand the performances that were staged in response and as proposed solutions; the other chapter in each part close-reads a single performance as the key to unraveling the policy problems bound up within the staging itself.

Part 1, "State-Stages," focuses, in different ways, on the infrastructural impact of reunification on the state and municipal stages, *Staatstheater* and *Stadttheater*, in the former East and West. Chapter 1 examines the controversial closure of the three-stage State-Stage Complex, or Staatliche Schauspielbühnen, the largest and most expensive theater venture in former West Germany, which included the iconic Schiller Theater. This unexpected decision by the Berlin Senate in June 1993 catalyzed a dramatic series of structural debates about the status of the state-subsidized theater in Berlin and the future of German cultural policy writ large. The first chapter also functions as a contextual companion to this introduction. The public conversations that culminated in the closure of the complex in 1993 and the performances that were staged in protest serve as a heuristic for a more detailed historical conversation about the origins of the state-stage and its—sometimes self-imposed—floundering in the face of the new Berlin government's emerging neoliberal agenda of urban development in the early 1990s.

While the debates sparked by the closure of the State-Stage Complex certainly raised important questions about the future of a reunified German state-subsidized theater ecosystem, from the perspective of the former East, the controversy was also, in many ways, a highly bourgeois and western drama. Chapter 2 focuses on two prominent former East Berlin state-stages that underwent major infrastructural and aesthetic adjustments in the mid-1990s: the privatization of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and Frank Castorf's rise to prominence as the new *Intendant* of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. By means of an analysis of Castorf's recent engagement with Brecht's *Lehrstück* and its accompanying theory, I argue that Castorf worked explicitly to refunction Brecht's hopes for a very different kind, or art, of public—and publicly supported—theater in reunified Berlin.

The second part of the book shifts focus by considering projects that reckon with the precarious future of the state-stage through very different practices of dis/avowal—practices that try, in different ways, to "free" themselves of this one infrastructural model in search of others. In other words, part 2, "Free-Scenes," tracks the emergence of the heterogeneous assortment

of performance practices and organizational structures that constitute Berlin's independent or so-called free-scene (*freie Szene*), again in both the former East and West.

After its closure in 1990, the Palast der Republik quickly emerged as one of Berlin's most controversial sites of contested memory. The subsequent decision to raze the Palast and to rebuild the Prussian Imperial Palace (Berliner Stadtschloss) in its stead catalyzed heated architectural and city-planning debates and protests in the early 1990s that continue into the present. Chapter 3 examines a series of interdisciplinary performance experiments within the shell of the former Palast just after the millennium, which set out not only to critique its destruction but also to investigate collectively the possibilities for a radically public and entirely temporary performance institution in the newly gentrifying center of reunified Berlin. I argue that this durational initiative, titled Volkspalast (People's Palace), attempted to enact a "spectral" mode of institutional disappearance, exploring various ways that arts infrastructures in the burgeoning free-scene might remember and reimagine civic space.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ways "alternative" works of free-scene theater set themselves apart (or not) from the aesthetic and labor configurations and funding structures of the state-stage. To address these questions, I turn to the popular Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) performance complex—a center for Berlin's free-scene—and a performance at HAU by andcompany&Co. titled *The (Coming) Insurrection according to Friedrich Schiller*. I examine how this performance both traces and stages an infrastructural politics of Berlin's free-scene by offering a critique of the recent mobilizations on its behalf. I argue further that andcompany&Co.'s performance exposes the complex ways in which HAU dis/avows the steadily increasing precarity of a project-based and mobile performance economy by providing a bastion for artistic laborers in search of a secure home base.

Finally, *Institutional Theatrics* concludes where it began (as does this introduction) with a more thorough analysis of—and additional questions posed by—the recent controversies at the Volksbühne. Did Chris Dercon's appointment mark a final stage of disavowal and Berlin's ultimate embrace of itself as a postindustrial European capital of global capital? Or do the ongoing mobilizations and cultural political conversations on behalf of a "new" Volksbühne provide continued evidence (and hope) for dis/avowal as a performative strategy for rethinking Berlin's public institutions?

After we finished speaking with the security guard, Katrin and I mounted our bikes and set out for home. As we made our way down Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße and toward the bright lights of Alexanderplatz, we speculated aloud about how the situation at the Volksbühne might resolve. I had no idea yet the role this rather odd encounter—and the Chris Dercon situation as a whole—would come to play in my ongoing thinking about this book. I had

no idea that Dercon's tenure would last only seven months before he would be fired by the new culture senator. I had no idea that René Pollesch—a staple of Castorf's Volksbühne—would be the next in line to take the reins. I return briefly to the security guard again here because our innocent yet unexpectedly provocative conversation is indicative of the joys, quandaries, challenges, and surprises of composing a history of the present. Although I couldn't have predicted the outcome that night on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, the occupation that looms above aligns with one of the analytical strands of this book: the investigation of performance's potential to utilize the public institutions of its support to reimagine those very institutions from within. The looming security crackdown, on the other hand, aligns with another concomitant strand, one that reckons with the increasing precarity of Berlin's (and the larger, global) performance economy. As I discovered along the way—and as I demonstrate in the pages that follow—these strands constitute the entwined logics of institutional dis/avowal.