

methuen | drama

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AMERICAN THEATRE ENSEMBLES VOLUME 2

Post-1995:
The Builders Association,
Pig Iron Theatre, Rude Mechs,
Radiohole, The Civilians, and 600 Highwaymen

CHAPTER 6 RADIOHOLE *Steve Luber*

Of the Gravity of the Radiohole, and Why It Does Not Prevent Them from Often Doing Inconsiderate Things, a.k.a. the Introduction¹

The program for Radiohole's first performance, *Bender*, featured the following program note:

Leading experts now estimate that the music business is currently 90 percent hype and 10 percent bullshit. Radiohole, bless their hearts, have gone far beyond that. Their music needs no hype. It transcends the very essence of the bullshit for which the public pays millions each year. Do not be fooled by gossip and idle rumors. In a world of sham, Radiohole are truly the genuine article.

The note reads as off-kilter, funny, and pompous all in one. It is exemplary of a company that, for the past twenty years, has been making work that attempts to escape the hype-bullshit machine of contemporary art and remain faithful to an aesthetic and ideological performance process. In that time, Radiohole has maintained their egalitarian working style, their rebellious, uproarious reputation, and the hedonistic excess of their work.

Excess would be the most succinct theme of Radiohole's work. They are excessively committed to an egalitarian organization, one they admit is doomed to fail; they are excessive in the physical and social lengths they go to create and perform; most notably, their performances are Bacchanalia fueled by sexual, culinary, violent, alcoholic excess. It's not only a method but a lifestyle, with "free beer" as a staple of every Radiohole performance. Radiohole audiences are undoubtedly more responsive and rowdier than a typical art-house crowd, and performances are punctuated by the rhythmic snapping of beer cans opening.

The anything-goes feel of excess translates to the content of the work, which has been called “a sort of mashup of ideas and concepts plumbing the depths of the American collective imagination” and “a sort of torrential museum of 21st-century American madness” (Grote 2006; Barker 2017, 177), with the only through-line being “a sort of”—that is to say, that Radiohole gives audiences and critics a difficult time in pinning down what they do and why they’re doing it. Indeed, I long ago grew tired of the “disappointingly reductive” discourse surrounding the company as “out there” or as an “ain’t it wild, gang?” novelty (see Luber 2007, 157). While the excess of Radiohole can appear flip, off-putting, or even self-defeating on the surface, underneath is now a sustained, marathon-like critique of the United States—its economy, its arts scenes, its citizens—in all its absurd, abject hilarity and horror.

Radiohole has become the paradigm of artmakers under US democracy, much in the way Alexis de Tocqueville described democratic tendencies almost 200 years ago—as indulgent, secular, physical, crude, if admirable; Radiohole, as Tocqueville described people living in democratic times, attempt to form new modes of knowledge “that they cultivate [science, literature, and the arts] after their own fashion and bring to the task their own peculiar qualifications and deficiencies” (1972 [1945], 40). That cultivation has led to some very messy experiments in process, content, and reception. Despite working with an ideology rooted in a utopian political system, Radiohole produces some of the most outlandish, grotesque, and sardonic performances. How are we to compromise the egalitarian spirit with the hyperreal performance of excess? Through a set of interviews, correspondences, and performance case studies, I will argue that the unique work of Radiohole, because of its performance of excess and referentiality, is necessary to the maintenance of democracy: Radiohole may, in fact, be saving us all.

Of Some Sources of Poetry among Radiohole Performances, a.k.a. Genealogy

Radiohole is made up of Erin Douglass, Eric Dyer, Scott Halvorsen Gillette, and Maggie Hoffman. Over the company’s twenty-year life span, they have collaborated with a rotating roster of “Associated Holes,” including Ilan Bachrach, Amanda Bender, Jim Findlay and Iver Findlay (both in their capacity as the company Collapsible Giraffe and as individual artists),

Jason Grote, Romanie Harper, Ryan Holsopple (31 Down), So Yong Kim, Catherine McRae, Joseph Silovsky, and Kristin Worrall. The story of their formation illustrates their limbs of the Experimental Performance Family Tree.

The group coalesced slowly throughout the 1990s. Dyer and Silovsky met at Bard as undergraduates. Silovsky then worked with Hoffman and Halvorsen Gillette while studying at the Art Institute of Chicago. When Hoffman, Silovsky, and their collaborator Regi Metcalf came to New York in 1996 to perform at the Ontological-Hysterical, the home of Richard Foreman, the pair stayed with Dyer. Eventually, employment brought them all to New York: Dyer was an associate and technician for the Wooster Group, Hoffman continued to perform downtown with artists such as Elevator Repair Service and the Foundry, and Halvorsen Gillette had been brought to the city in 1995 by John Jesurun and Mike Taylor and worked for the Wooster Group, Foreman, and others. After a series of such intersections, they came together to create *Bender* (1998) and *The History of Heen: Not Francis E. Dec, Esq.* (1999), presented at the Wooster Group’s home, the Performing Garage. While working on *Heen*, Douglass, an intern for the Group, was assigned to help Radiohole. They asked her to direct. She was clearly attuned to the Group’s process and aesthetic, and became the fourth member for their next project, *Rodan: A Jive Hummer*.

Downtown giants loom large here—the Wooster Group, Foreman, Jesurun. Like the progeny of icons, Radiohole is unavoidably influenced by these predecessors, while constantly trying to escape those influences and conventions. A number of important tropes and commonalities are clear; the first is the downtown New York scene of the 1970s, each part of which Bonnie Marranca wrote about as the “Theatre of Images” (1977). While not devoid of dialogue as Marranca sets down, it still shuns most notions of conventional dramatic forms, and “Actors do not create ‘roles.’ They function instead as media through which the playwright expresses his [*sic*] ideas; they serve as icons and images. Text is merely a pretext—a scenario” (1977, x–xi). And while each of these early influences upon the company belong to a generalized late twentieth-century aesthetic, they also each had profoundly unique styles and foci in their process and performances. At base, I bring these elements up to display how members of Radiohole are influenced by these companies, but more importantly, how they react against them.

From Foreman, the members of Radiohole developed a strong, almost obsessive sense of imagery and place. A Radiohole performance has a

similar aesthetic of controlled chaos, a silly dreamscape. Playwright, critic, and eventual collaborator Jason Grote grounded their designs in seventeenth-century “wonder cabinets” or collections of curios (2006). But unlike Foreman’s sets, which seem more a Victorian dystopia, Radiohole’s owe more to early twentieth-century lowbrow forms such as vaudeville or Max Fleischer cartoons or more recent punk/zine/DIY culture of the 1990s.

From Jesurun and Taylor, the company likely has developed a keen sense of media and tinkering. The company has always embraced a certain “trash aesthetic,” partly thanks to funding restrictions, but have incorporated complex design and tech elements into all their performances. Like the work of Jesurun, the technology is necessary, not an ornament; sometimes the technology is even used against itself to further the atmosphere or messaging. Televisions are too small to see; sound has been mixed to dissonance. And while their pieces have never been as grandiose or explicitly tech-heavy like the Builders Association, Ex Machina, or Laurie Anderson, they have concocted some lavish technical experiments, played with new tech toys, and relied on software, apps, and good old-fashioned engineering to maintain their onstage control. The trash aesthetic can appear deceptively simple and adds to the feeling of excessive clutter.

It is to the company’s credit that this has gone under-discussed by scholars and performance critics when imagining the Radiohole canon; they have incorporated these technologies almost seamlessly or, more to the point, in a contemporary frame for creating and reading performance. This can be credited to the immense collective experience of the group in design, engineering, technology, and performance; the group focuses these skills into their complex but exacting kinetic stage pictures. In addition, Radiohole has come of age in the era of cell phones—later smartphones—and more accessible programming capabilities, all of which they have mobilized. They have engineered set pieces to see how much weight they could handle during the action of performance; as Dyer put it in an interview: “And I think part of it was an engineering thing. How far we can push structural integrity with this stuff by putting mass on it in *Fluke*, say, where people climb on it. Or in *Heen* or *Rodan*, we built these edifices that were these performing machines that were like jungle gyms; we pushed that material to its maximum” (Barker 2017, 185). They have also used more explicit “advanced tech,” like “audio spotlights” to mess with the minds of audience members, and most cues are triggered these days by the performers’ cell phones (see Luber 2007). This is all in addition to some innovative lighting and sound work the group has put

together. But perhaps what has been most significant and subtle is how they develop their live tech deployment in performance. Once run from samplers and mixers, mobile and software technologies have allowed the group to control and/or sabotage performances with increasingly flexible and dynamic tools.

The strongest legacy, though, comes from the Wooster Group. Indeed, the resonances are myriad: both employ mobile media-set-pieces; mine artistic, historical, and literary source texts in the service of mashing up, dissociating, and subverting a sense of historical and performance narrative; blur lines between performer and character, performance and the present moment; convey a holistic and virtuosic sense of precision, even in moments of apparent chaos; have developed an aesthetic that is unmistakable, equally confounding and exciting, frustrating and illuminating, obtuse and simplistic. The biographical work of Spalding Gray and the Wooster Group’s *Rhode Island Trilogy* plays out in the company’s continuing confessional texts peppered throughout their performances. The uniquely engineered set elements that are almost cyborgian, like those of *House/Lights* or *To You, the Birdie!* are echoed in Radiohole pieces like *Bender, Whatever, Heaven Allows* (2010), and *Inflatable Frankenstein* (2013). Finally, the collective generation of a performance text is most crucial to Radiohole, who have taken this element that the Wooster Group had refined so well, and found its borderline-absurd extreme. The equal-participant model is one such extension foundational to the ideology of the company. Much like the Wooster Group, Radiohole uses a number of source texts for both quotation and derivation in each piece; they both use these texts, as David Savran eloquently posited, as an offering for sacrifice, each reference “becoming merely one morsel to be devoured by a text that remains radically plural and irreducible, a text that defies a single reading” (Savran 1988, 52).² Unlike the Wooster Group, however, the text is not a subsidiary of the action, nor is it treated that way in the generation of performance.

All of these companies are or were led by strong—some might say authoritarian—auteurs (Foreman, LeCompte, Jesurun), with members developing skills that supplemented performance—graphic design, lighting, welding, electrical work. And each of these influences embraced quite a dense, high-art aesthetic. Notably, Radiohole has consistently generated work as a collective—no set roles in production, no central writer or director—an egalitarian ethic of creation. This makes Radiohole stand out, even among other twenty-first-century experimental companies. Members of Radiohole continued or continue to work with the Wooster Group in particular, as

well as collaborate with many other limbs off this Downtown family tree. But they have cultivated an aesthetic that they only accomplish together as Radiohole. The radical democracy fosters such a strong commitment to form, resulting in a unique performance alchemy. Their commitment to this ideology vastly influences their process, reception, and visibility in the field, and somewhat paradoxically situates them as one of the most unique and yet overlooked companies at work in the United States today. I can only speculate as to why: their embrace of lowbrow jokes and innuendo, of the pop within the experimental, less frequent and lower-profile presentations of their work. Sometimes sometimes such a strong voice makes trouble for fostering a vocabulary for discourse at all; and even when recognized for the work, their institutional critique fosters a mistrust of financial supporters—an aversion to selling out to a corporate artscape or selling short of their work made under sponsored conditions. How is a radical performance company meant to function, in both creation and influence, in a neoliberal system? Somewhat paradoxically, Radiohole's greatest powers and difficulties derive from the same radical democratic work ethic.

In What Spirit Radiohole Cultivates the Arts, a.k.a. Process

Many elements, styles, and processes of the people and groups mentioned above have indeed filtered into the Radiohole process: the density of the sets and text, the disposal of literary traditions, the use and misuse of source texts, and the nuanced incorporation of technologies. But there are a number of facets of the Radiohole process that set it apart from predecessors, namely in their avowal of an egalitarian collective, contributing to a unique aesthetic and dysfunctional functioning, as described below. Whether elements or whole-cloth performances succeed or fail, the process is radical in its form and political implications.

While the term “collective” can define all kinds of working relationships and an array of processes, Radiohole builds their shows together—everyone has a say in the writing, everyone has a say in the design and deployment of stagecraft, everyone shapes the aesthetic of each piece. Their work is reminiscent of the compulsion Tocqueville points out in a democratic state: “In democratic communities the imagination is compressed when men [*sic*] consider themselves; it expands indefinitely when they think of the state. Hence it is that the same men [*sic*] who live on a small scale in cramped dwellings frequently aspire to gigantic splendor in the erection of their

public monuments” (1972 [1945], 53). What is the Radiohole performer if not living on a “small scale in cramped dwellings”? What is the Radiohole performance if not a public monument to the excess and curiosities of this democratic culture? Each member is indefinitely bolstered by the work with others.

And while each member has their own strengths and even concentrations, the pieces are ultimately created, written, designed, directed, and run by “Radiohole.” This guiding principle has a profound effect on the work. The most immediate effect is the stunning inefficiency of this all-hands-on-deck approach to labor. Without compartmentalization, each element must be tested, altered, and retested at least four times.

At least.

In order to better understand how Radiohole works, I interviewed them in Dyer's apartment in 2017 after months of email conversations and information-gathering. It seemed only fair to conduct an interview with all of them in the same room—the myth of Radiohole should be built collaboratively as their work is. History should be written and contested live, and each should have an equal voice in this chronicle. This, of course, means there is an excess of history, multiple narratives overlaid on an attempt to secure one story. When all write the stories, no one will be definitive, or, when generated together, all that attributable. A conversation about what Radiohole is and how they work, therefore, is a collective performance, of which this chapter, in large part, is an artifact, and as such should be considered expert and counterfactual, excessive and incomplete—not to mention that it is all put through an academic meatgrinder in the form of my own narrative and research, the eyes of multiple editors, all of whom have worked to generate material for (an admittedly minor) academic market and labor force. It is something of an exercise in futility to convey the spirit of Radiohole within these parameters.³

Ultimately, all parties must be happy with the way a particular moment, look, or text comes across, which leads to heated conversation, arguments, walkouts, and occasional parting-of-ways. Indeed the early Radiohole rehearsals were infamous and included many shouting contests and thrown beer bottles. Writing for *The Brooklyn Rail*, Grote observed, “Radiohole operates more like a sort of anarchist affinity group. They work by consensus (which really means by fighting until they're all exhausted enough to agree on something), but they're small enough, and know each other so well, that this type of creation-by-radical-democracy seems to be working” (2006). Of course, Grote never exactly defines what it means for Radiohole to “work”

for a group whose output blurs the line between function and dysfunction, precision, and chaos. In conversation, Hoffman claims that the “struggle gets easier,” as they have learned over the course of two decades how to work better together, and, arguably, as they have personally grown comfortable in their own lives, with side-hustles, relocations, and families.

But this is also a part of a discussion about how to communicate a Radiohole process for an academic essay, which proved just as obtuse as ever: “We don’t understand. The four of us have no idea where we come from. We’re just here. And it’s completely inchoate,” says Halvorsen Gillette.

“No, we don’t come in completely inchoate!” Dyer jumps in. When I explain I’m trying to convey a sense of process, Halvorsen Gillette smiles genuinely and retorts, “I don’t even feel like that’s a fucking thing.” And thusly I’m given a significant glimpse into the Radiohole process.

A sizeable percentage of Radiohole performance can be categorized as misinformation or anti-knowledge-making as well. One need only consider their fragmented and warped revisionist history of literature, history, or pop culture, not to mention their elision on questions of process and politics or their refusal to land on a singular history of almost anything with regard to themselves as a collective. Indeed, even the name of the company is offered as, at best, layered, if not a series of counterfactuals derived from the Bible, science, and/or theoretical physics.⁴ But in conversation, the group’s form belies the content. While we discuss the contingencies involved in making work—how much time and money is available, who brings a current obsession to investigate, and whatever other “personal shit” is being brought to the table—I’m privy to the debates and conversations and processes that go into the creation of a Radiohole narrative or some approximation thereof. And while the result is quite dissonant and ultimately unresolved, the system of checks and balances, of testing ideas, of contesting definitions (the room argues over the definition and mobilization of “irony” for an extended period of time, as they do “ensemble” and “political correctness”), is clear; the interdependence of personalities and tastes reveals itself.

Ideas are presented, competing ideas arise, debate abounds—sometimes tactful and caring, sometimes aggressive. Deadlocks are possible for sure and sometimes indicative of where the idea will live—outside Radiohole-land. And to be clear, these heated discussions and arguments, though sometimes romanticized or idealized in discourse, can have significant repercussions. Sometimes obstacles are circumstantial, such as when Halvorsen Gillette moved to Vermont in 2004, slowing the group’s creative process, which

consequently left Halvorsen Gillette out on occasion. Rehearsal periods are interrupted by the need for tempers to cool; side projects (particularly those that pay) take priority.

But Radiohole has continued to make work at an impressive clip, proving that compromise, and their own unique brand of compromise, is necessary for creation, in every nook and cranny of performance, as Douglass draws one of the (very few) conclusions: “It’s the little compromises that make it so good.”

The equal exchange of ideas translates to the productions themselves, where all members are responsible for all aspects of production—sets and props, marketing, fund-raising, and of course, running the shows, which they all do mostly onstage. They also take turns running the box office, which has led to some missing cues, and, for *Fluke*, a telematic ticket-taker in the form of Halvorsen Gillette, who appeared on a monitor above a fishbowl-cashbox live on video chat from Vermont, in one of the most faithful gestures I have seen any company extend to its audience (see Luber 2007, 156). While much of the performance magic is not necessarily revealed, the labor most certainly is. Performers are not simply performing action and text within the world of the performance; they create the world as they go, which can lead to madcap ballets and feats of athleticism, punctuated by moments of almost imperceptible shifts in sound, light, and movement.

And the goal, the endgame of these considerations, remains almost entirely insular to the group, which leads to a second important component of Radiohole’s ethic: the shunning of corporate structures in the running and creative processes of the organization. Much of this is a disdain for the influence of capitalist systems, but there is also a deeper tendency toward freedom; a citizen of democracy as described by Tocqueville “will soonest conceive and most highly value that government whose head he has himself [sic] elected and whose administration he [sic] may control” (287). Radiohole is radical democracy in this sense, trimming all mediators and depending upon the work of themselves alone.

This is difficult to sell, then, to cultural organizations and grant-dispensing institutions. Radiohole is mostly funded by small contributions from supporters and friends. They are consistently awarded grants by New York State and City cultural offices and have been presented by a variety of performance venues in the United States and abroad.⁵ Ultimately, though, the lack of ostensible hierarchy creates a series of challenges in a marketplace of performance that still speaks a language of strict disciplinarity and bureaucratic silos. Discussing the egalitarian approach in 2012, Dyer has

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said, "the *process*, the back end of what we do, is very political. It comes out of a direct reaction to the way most theater is structured which basically mimics the structure of a corporate hierarchy" (Browning 2012, 43). But does the ideology stem from the process, or is it the other way 'round?

Either way, Radiohole has experienced a number of limitations as a result: there have been grants that they cannot apply for because the application requires a single name or recipient: "You can never credit anyone entirely for anything in ensemble work," Halvorsen Gillette states proudly, and capitalism rewards singular genius. There is also a bias in the market for figureheads or leaders as vehicle for demystifying process or meaning. This makes their narrative in the critical and artistic discourse unconventional, somewhat less accessible, and removed. Radiohole is not PR friendly. They do not have a rise-to-stardom or rise-to-notoriety story; many of their performance documents cannot be printed in mainstream publications; indeed, their website stubbornly maintains its gloriously turn-of-the-twenty-first-century look.

It all adds up to apparent defiance in the face of trends toward homogeneity of the International Performance Festival Circuit or Off-Off-Broadway as stepladders to commercial success. Halvorsen Gillette mentions something quite revealing while discussing process: "I think we're obsessed with our own loser-dom." The reflexivity is important: the company's marginalization is a quality they embrace politically and mine aesthetically, but are also bound to judge after nearly twenty years of work together. Their commitment to ideology has served them well in the work, poorly in the market. Halvorsen Gillette adds firmly "Because we've insisted on being egalitarian, we've failed in the marketplace of the art world; we make work that fails aesthetically."

"But what's failure, though?" asks Douglass, stating that this may be a non-issue, or at least a distraction.

"It's a beef!" Dyer calls out.

"Well ..." interjects Hoffman, "I feel like a lot of times there are roles given—that one person is more the writer, is more the director. That with ensembles, it's not like—I don't know anybody who works exactly the way we do." In other words, some of these systems exist because they can work even for other companies that label themselves "ensembles" or "collectives." This is one significant method of contribution to the Radiohole debates, as challenge-via-temperance. Hoffman steps up to clarify how the group defines failure and their relationship to the market. And they continue to argue the merits of their radical democratic work and the need/definition

of success, and a chicken-and-the-egg conundrum of playing the corporate-institutional game to get funding.

The process of defining process, too, is a moving target. But of course, this is a process, only one that Radiohole works out piece by piece and certainly not in conversation. As Dyer has stated in the past, "Yes, we choose a different subject or a different theme or a different book, but it's almost incidental to working together—the way that we relate to each other and have evolved over the years is one ongoing working process" (Browning 2012, 42). The sets of compromises, the arguments, the walkouts are all part of this process, and the egalitarian spirit ensures that not one of them sees it the same way as any of the others; the result is a layered, referential, often manic performance style, as is evident in taking a closer look at specific pieces. The two presented here are somewhat less documented than others, and I think present quite dynamic contrasts over the trajectory of the artists' careers and how the group has maintained its special blend of profanity and integrity in the face of shifting political, economic, and artistic landscapes.

Why the Americans have never been so eager as the French for General Ideas in Political Affairs, a.k.a. *Radiohole Is Still My Name*

Radiohole was quite prolific after the first production, *Bender* (1998). They produced six shows in as many years: *A History of Heen: Not Francis E. Dec, Esq.* (1999), *Rodan: a jive hummer* (1999–2000), *Bend Your Mind Off* (1999–2000), *Wurst (take it and eat it!) (I mean, take it and keep it)* (2001), *None of It: More or Less Hudson's Bay, Again* (2002), and *Radiohole Is Still My Name* (2004). In this time, the group received a fervent, if small, critical and artistic following, as they continued to mine the obscure and epic for their aesthetic goulash of performances. They took apart historical figures such as the schizophrenic conspiracy theorist Dec, French philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, the atomic bomb, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Germanic myth behind the Ring Cycle and Siegfried, and arctic exploration.

By 2004, they had reached a new quantum of existence: they had earned some critical and institutional support (*None of It* was the first to be presented, in this case by P.S. 122), found a rhythm in the creation and production of work, and begun to come to terms with no longer being early-career artists. Combine this with the upheaval of Halvorsen Gillette's relocation to

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Vermont, and the group was primed for professional reckoning. The result was *Radiohole Is Still My Name* (colloquially referred to by the company as *Name*), one of their most resonant and memorable performances.

Rooted in fascinations with the plays of the Situationist International (S.I.), a radical anti-capitalist art collective from France in the 1950s to 1960s, and spaghetti westerns, for *Name* Radiohole built their own Through-the-Looking-Glass vision of the United States. Indeed both *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967, the most enduring manifesto from the S.I.) and spaghetti westerns are warped, European interpretations of the US democratic project, albeit from very different vantages. To quote Debord, in this environment of spectacle, "Images detach from life; spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, the autonomous movement of non-life" (1994, 12). It is a fantasy of the glory of the westward expansion, a story of images to affirm our current lifestyles of passivity, of western non-expansion. Radiohole's Wild West is dominated by excesses of sex, food, violence, and manifest destiny; it is cheap and superficial, much like the monuments raised in Tocqueville. Moments of ruthless self-deprecation are dotted with almost messianic pride. A dream of the good life, a just life, is overtaken by a fast-food franchise named Norton's Disco Chicken Lickin' Haven.

To open, associate Joe Silovsky sets up a paper scroll the width of the stage that features a crudely drawn Western landscape, as he manipulates a small family car driving along. Dyer narrates with genre clichés, peppered with Situationist Marxism:

The American West. A strange land, beautiful and savage—buzzards, flies, diseased livestock, thunder, lightning, locusts—and the systematic production of all the diversions and works of a society. The American West: where a man with nothing to lose can lose still more. Where a man can search his whole life for justice, and find only the smoking end of a gun.

(Radiohole 2004)

Upon the car's arrival, the paper falls away and a bright light shines at the audience (the blistering desert sun? an icon of cool, cinematic entrances?), where Hoffman, Dyer, and Douglass are silhouetted, epic Western soundtrack music blaring. They set up TV dinner trays and stools stored within briefcases full of cash, and proceed to perform a strange dance that involves Hoffman sensually rubbing her posterior with a fried chicken drumstick, Dyer using a salt shaker on a stick to season his penis,

and Douglass playing with her exposed breast. They all seem nonchalant, routine in this dance, even when they begin to interact, salting or jiggling each other's private parts.

They have entered the Wild West and are looking for a spot to call home but remain unimpressed. Silovsky, on a child's tricycle, defends it: "It's such a lovely town! It just needs a 7-11. AM/PM Mini Mart—no, those are out of business—and it'd be just like America!" (ibid.). A series of Western scenes play out, including a love triangle and a shoot-out between Douglass and Hoffman. Everyone gets shot (represented by confetti poppers that the cast wear affixed to their costumes), and Dyer takes advantage of the quiet to dispense with the "cowboy stuff" and monologue a bit about the Situationist International and what the art collective means to him. When he veers into personal territory, he is laughed offstage, and Hoffman introduces Douglass as the company member tasked with solving Radiohole's funding issues, which have been depleted due to war and recession. Douglass makes the stakes clear:

By making the right choices, we can make the right choice for our future. If Radiohole goes to sleep, the rest of the world is in trouble. If we blink, the rest of the world will close their eyes. So we're not blinking, and we're not going to sleep. Our strategy at Radiohole will require us not to go to sleep. This will require new resources.

(ibid.)

But this too is interrupted by Silovsky bringing gifts of food, and a conversation that ends with warnings of poverty and demoralization give way to the entire company sitting at a short table and proceeding to gorge on baskets of fried chicken and biscuits, cans of green beans, and forties of Budweiser for a full six minutes. The company barely speaks the entire time, as though they are competing to eat the most. (Buckets were kept by either end of the table in case of a gastrointestinal emergency.) The display is by turns disgusting, hilarious, mesmerizing, and downright impressive.

It makes for a visceral performative counterpoint to the intellectual, Marxist-inflected theories of the Situationists, which lamented how power and spectacle alienate and divide contemporary citizens from themselves and others. Spectacle is "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (Debord 1994, 24, original emphasis), and excess represented the false consciousness of freedom and choice. In order for Radiohole's West to become the American West, it needs a 7-11. It needs to incorporate the

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iconography, the representation of the United States. With their artists' banquet, Radiohole is making a satirical comment on art as excess, akin to the US-brand democratic excess of fast food and cheap booze enabled by the whims of state funding and its fluctuating coffers due to wartime and the United States' global manifest destiny. Artists are as victimized as any other citizen, and the inherently tainted reach of capital makes slaves of us all for the system's consumption.

The banquet stands as the most visceral and direct commentary on what is expected of artists, how they are expected to work and placate the citizenry, and the ugliness in the dissonance of a society's romantic, spectacular ideations of the artist and the stark reality of living as an artist in the twenty-first-century United States. Of course, this is just as true of the Wild West; the West of John Wayne and John Ford are similar fantasies to both cover up the arduousness of the Manifest Destiny, but more importantly to sanitize history and to reaffirm American morality, justice, and honor of an era that often dispensed with these qualities entirely, especially when mandated by the republic. This is why the West in Radiohole's world seems more cinema, more montage (to return to the Marxist inflection) than place. This is why the tumbleweeds "roll" across the stage atop RC cars. The impression has overtaken the reality; we like the iconography better. It is awash in romanticism, heroism, and adventure, as opposed to disease, oppression, and genocide. Radiohole is amplifying these tendencies, not satirizing so much as exploding them enough to expose the fantasy and the absurd desires that undergird our collective, pop-influenced memory of the American West.

The ideology of hierarchical mistrust and belief in the evils of capitalism is shared by the Situationists, the radically individual cowboys of cinema, and Radiohole itself. Toward the completion of the piece, Douglass recounts a bad dream that looms over the entirety of the performance: "I done dreamed we got ambushed by music hating, reg'lar crust loving, chicken salters." The acceptance of the spectacle, the surrender, seemed to be antithetical to the Radiohole project.

But this is the cultural and sociological moment that the group was facing, and the feared "chicken salters" indeed took over and further gentrified the Collapsible Hole's Williamsburg neighborhood, and Radiohole had to return west in *Tarzana*. If *Name* was playing up the melodrama of the Wild West, *Tarzana* aimed to flatten it, to accentuate the two-dimensionality of living the artistic life in the Great American Cities.

How Quality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man, a.k.a. *Tarzana*

After *Name*, the company began to experiment more with their form. The visions got more ambitious, sprawling—their environments became more grandiose. *Fluke* (*The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Deep*) or *Dick Dick Dick* (2006) took on *Moby Dick* as a metaphor for the American experiment; ANGER/NATION (2008) featured a lush den of sensuality in a mashup of the films of Kenneth Anger and writings of the nineteenth-century hatchet-wielding temperance crusader, Carrie A. Nation; *Whatever, Heaven Allows* (2010) took on a similar virtue-sin dichotomy with Douglas Sirk's 1950s cinematic melodramas and Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and *Inflatable Frankenstein* (2013) was inspired by, well, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Acknowledging the company's sustained excellence, the company was awarded the P.S. 122 Spalding Gray Award in 2009, given to fund new work by established artists; meanwhile, in the largest coup against the company, the Collapsible Hole, their home space that they had shared with the Collapsible Giraffe in Brooklyn since 2000, closed in 2013 with a characteristically Dionysian funeral that took over the streets of Williamsburg (for an account, see Barker 2017).

The lack of home turf complicated already hectic and demanding schedules. As a potential remedy for this new set of circumstances, the group accepted a challenge that was entirely new to them as Radiohole: a play. La MaMa was paying tribute to Tom Murrin, a longtime resident performer in the downtown scene (best known to many as "The Alien Comic"), who had passed away the year before. Radiohole agreed to take on Murrin's play *Myth* (or *Maybe Meth*) (1969) but was given license to give it the Radiohole treatment. The result was *Myth* or *Meth* (or *Maybe Moscow?*). Even with creative liberties, the group admits that it was an awkward first experience with any sort of responsibility to an outside force. To make matters more difficult, neither Douglass nor Hoffman had the time to rehearse given new professional and personal demands. Murrin's text made up much of the performance, as did Radiohole's explicit and implicit referentiality to the bygone downtown scene and Murrin's signature meta-comedy. But in process, personnel, and performance, *Myth* or *Meth* seems the least "Radiohole" performance to date.

Despite its obstacles and somewhat mismatched styles, *Myth* or *Meth* made room for the company to reconsider its working process, and so they

offered their first commission to playwright and sometime conspirator, Jason Grote. Grote had been a downtown fixture as a playwright and critic, with a noted performance blog and plays such as *Maria/Stuart* (2008), and had recently gone west to make a career as a screenwriter for television shows such as *Smash*, *Mad Men*, and *Hannibal*. This unique blend of avant-garde and pop sensibilities in many ways makes Grote as ideal a fit as possible for the inaugural Radiohole commission.⁶ According to the group and Grote, he was given no parameters, no requests, and Radiohole was to take total control once the piece had been written. In one striking example, the group decided to draw character names at random at the first rehearsal. In other words, these were two parties who felt trusting enough to surrender to each other.

Grote presented the group with *Tarzana*, a meditation on cities as space and place via Kandor (the capital city from Superman's home planet of Krypton that was shrunk and saved in a bottle by supervillain Brainiac), Robespierre's political theory, and a dash of the late 1970s NYC punk scene.⁷ Grote and Radiohole also credit filmmakers David Lynch and Alejandro Jodorowsky as influences, though I would be hard-pressed to name a Radiohole performance that did *not* feature that combination of humor, grotesque, and surrealism.

Kandor, of course, does not exist, but the performance takes on this notion of spaces that are dreamed as much as realized. Despite the fictional setting of the play, the title indicates an actual place that is also not a place. Tarzana is now a suburb of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley and was once the 540-acre estate of Edgar Wright Burroughs, writer of the Tarzan books, the land for which he purchased in 1919. He planned to preserve it, but eventually developed it as a suburb and began to sell it off, mobilizing the language of colonization: "Let me tell you of the sort of colony I'd like to see grow up around my home—a colony of self-respecting people who wish to live and let live—who will respect the rights and privileges of their neighbors, and mind each his own affairs." Of course, the fine print contained a stipulation that "said premises or any part thereof shall not be leased, sold, or conveyed to or occupied by any person not of the Caucasian race" (Jurca 2001, 42). An environment marketed as a libertarian dream is, in fact, subject to the same oppressive projects of colonialism, themes reflected in the very premise of Burroughs's popular novels of the same name. The deceptive promises that place provides is at the heart of *Tarzana*.

The most striking element of the performance is its set: all in black and white, cartoonish if not comic bookish, and flat. This is quite a departure

from the typically colorful, cluttered sets of previous performances. A cardboard sofa is center stage, flanked on either side by cardboard phone booths. A cardboard chandelier hangs from the rafters. All is dwarfed by a giant cardboard TV upstage (this is where newscasts will be made and karaoke will be sung). Indeed, most every object and decoration onstage is fashioned out of cardboard. The pristine material makes for a stark medium, as the stage is systematically defiled in splatters and pools of milk, blood, and urine. While cheap, the entire set has to be remade for each performance.

The opening episode begins quiet and slow: Hoffman, as Robespierre, is dressed in eighteenth-century-ish attire and slumps in a chair whispering ardently into a microphone (made of cardboard); Douglass and Dyer, as "2 Non Blondes," sit in robes on the couch, chattering to themselves and smoking (cardboard) cigarettes, while associates Amanda Bender works a cardboard hotdog cart, writing down notes with a comically oversized pencil (also cardboard), and Ryan Holsopple, dressed as an unkempt Superman (with cardboard "S" insignia hanging from his chest), paces back and forth from phone booth to phone booth, drinking down two half gallons of milk (upsettingly, not cardboard) as he strips off his cape and tights, throws them out, and dons a new, identical set. Somewhere in the middle, Halvorsen Gillette enters dressed in an identical super-costume and stares at the rest of the stage, fists on hips, in disapproval. Finally, Holsopple makes himself a sandwich, cuts off the crust with a pair of scissors, then rolls and squishes the sandwich into a phallic cylinder and stuffs it in his red briefs. In response, Halvorsen Gillette reaches under his own briefs and pulls out his testicles, where they remain for the rest of the performance; he returns his fists to his hips.

"Welcome!" Holsopple smiles genuinely, "to the bottle city of Kandor!"

Throughout, Superman refrains, "I want to talk about cities," and indeed, this seems to be the main meditation of the piece, supplemented by tropes involving guillotines, hot dogs, guns, impotence, and vampires. All of the characters vacillate between self-involvement and self-doubt. Most characters are killed or kill themselves multiple times. Robespierre stops her paranoid monologuing enough to hump the hotdog vendor. Superman mows a vinyl lawn and waxes philosophical as would a bourgeois-bohemian suburbanite, trying to understand "my alienated relationship with my present world." He is nostalgic for a time that never was and still hopes for "the utopian city of the future." He is simultaneously entranced and saddened by the world he and his kind have engendered.

Robespierre often reads tracts from cardboard books, delineating recipes for a Reign of Terror: "Virtue without terror is disastrous [...] The thought of the self gives rise to all these vampires." She, too, expresses profound doubt in her deeds. She expresses the derailing of her championing the rights of the bourgeoisie and poor in Radiohole-speak: "All I wanted to do was buy the kids a tube steak!" and proceeds to the inherently clumsy task of trying to hang herself from a cardboard chandelier with a rope attached to a cardboard noose. After failing at this, she makes numerous other attempts with pills, alcohol, razor blades, and electrical sockets—all cardboard—and finally succeeds with a gun. Superman pours red paint on her head.

These oddly parallel characters intersect at the heart of the performance in which Hoffman-Robespierre shares a memory of the wonder and confusion of creating art in Brooklyn in her mid-twenties—that special comingling of thrill and existential dread that is common to the age, of both the person and bohemian neighborhood. As she relates her memories, special guest performers go-go dance upstage as vampire cupcakes, while Superman runs and dies with a bang center stage over and over again. With each collapse, Hoffman has to stop her monologue, put down her book, and dump fresh blood on him. Becoming more and more frenetic, she eventually runs out of blood and finds some milk to dump on him. Without blood or milk, she squats and urinates on Superman through her tights. It's an astonishing feat, and a reminder of the extremes that Radiohole is still willing to go through, the mind-numbing repetition of the creative cycle, and the frustrations and relief that come from the process. The repetition and obscene crescendo resonates with the banquet of *Name*, a glorious moment where the political and moral failures of these situations defy words, and we are only left with the violence and madness of consumption, excess, and waste.

The whole episode is an emotional and physical mess, which leads to the lengthy dénouement—a New-Orleans-style funeral for Radiohole itself. Hoffman returns to deliver a brief and angry eulogy, as weeping mourners lean over a coffin-shaped piece of cardboard covered in dirt: "Let us take heart. This is the sanctity of truth. Here lie the founders of Radiohole. The avengers of humanity and destroyers of Art Crust," Hoffman shouts, "the avengers of humanity and the destroyers of our trust." The coffin is carried away, as a trailing cardboard-playing band plays Dixieland jazz upon exeunt. Superman delivers one final matter-of-fact monologue while snacking on a hot dog on the couch: "I've died a couple of times already. The worst consequence was that I came back exactly as who I was before." He tells us

"they" are outside the theatre, being taken away in a police car, not able to distinguish between the sirens "they" are whooping and the thing itself.

Why stage one's own funeral, then? Is it to signify the end of a company that had a home, who only had time and energy and passion to dedicate to artmaking, who existed specifically in a time and place that no longer is? Is it a joke about the complacency of growing older? (Back in *Name*, Dyer was already lamenting that he was getting too old for all the "dumpster diving and ramen noodles.") It could just be a reenactment of the end of the Collapsible Hole. Or a statement about what Radiohole might be in the future.

What each of these elements in *Tarzana* has in common is the world in which they live—Robespierre's France, Superman's Kandor, the punks' downtown NYC, Burroughs's *Tarzana*, and Radiohole's Williamsburg—is an ideation. It is a vision for a utopia-adjacent world of fertile creation and justice. And, as with all utopias, these could never be and never quite were. The purity of the idea, the pristine white cardboard, is shown to be inevitably destroyed, besmirched, and awash with blood, sweat, and piss. But art, even art in a utopian regime, cannot exist without blood, sweat, and piss.

This also connects to *Name* in that both performances by a Brooklyn-based collective take on various times and spaces of the false consciousness of American imperialism, not to mention the constant return to excess characteristic of most Radiohole performances. The grandiosity of both ideas, the need to expand and exploit and take, seems to offend the sensibilities of a radically democratic ideology and thus translate to the grotesquerie toward which Radiohole is drawn. This allies itself with the company members' experiences as working artists and the expectations placed upon them in the face of proportionally laughable resources. Give us money, the Radiohole dares, and we can make you a set of cardboard—then pee on it.

How the Taste for Physical Gratification Is United in Radiohole to Love of Freedom and Attention to Public Affairs, a.k.a. the Conclusion

Returning to that first Radiohole program, I remember how mystified and excited I was before *Bender*, reading the note over: "Leading experts now estimate that the music business is currently 90 percent hype and 10 percent bullshit. Radiohole, bless their hearts, have gone far beyond that. [...] In a world of sham, Radiohole are truly the genuine article."

American Theatre Ensembles

It was unruly, it was funny, it was brilliant. It was also plagiarized. The note for *Bender* was taken almost word for word from the liner notes and review by T.M. Christian for a 1969 self-titled album by the Masked Marauders. To continue the dizzying spiral of referentiality, neither T.M. Christian nor the Masked Marauders were real. The review of the album was a satirical take on a fake supergroup (rumored to be made up by Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, John Lennon, and Mick Jagger) for an album that didn't exist, written by Greil Marcus under the pseudonym of Christian. But the piece garnered so much attention that the joke was extended by *Rolling Stone* editors: they helped record a real album with a group of ghost musicians and vocal impersonators. The album was remarkably successful for what was, at base, an indictment of the capitalist structures driving the music industry. It was a simulacrum of a hoax, written by a fake rock critic, all of which appeared as the uncredited take on a downtown New York performance in 1998. (One of the tracks on the Masked Marauders album, "More or Less Hudson's Bay Again," became the subtitle for Radiohole's subsequent performance, *None of It*.)

There is something dazzlingly illustrative in this citationality of the Radiohole program note, one that goes a long way to describe the Radiohole aesthetic and place among performance collectives of the twenty-first century. Marcus's work of journalism is indeed facetious—meant to annoy, upset, and mock art criticism and the art market it serves, but it is also beautifully incisive, reflexive, and grounded in its satire. Moreover, it is an effusive piece about a super-group, a band that is predicated on excess and the need to push high heights higher. The review is ultimately coming from a place of grave concern for the field, a breadth of knowledge as to why one should be concerned, as well as one that is well placed to change it, to shift the conversation by upending convention (or, in this case, the existence) of how art is made in a supercharged capitalist society. A fake review by a fake critic of a nonexistent band reveals the Emperor has no clothes on; indeed, the momentary success of the real-fake band exemplifies the power of this exercise and the sad truth of a public's willingness to consume the hoax despite seeing the hoaxiness of it all. This theme has remained painfully relevant moment to moment in the United States and its shared upbringing of Radiohole over the past twenty years. If anything, the chaos of Radiohole's worlds has come to seem more a premonition than a satire.

In a way, though, Radiohole is the Masked Marauders: a group of talented artists who work under the veil of a larger critique of the culture from which they had been forged. The way through is to mine the depths of their

individuality as artists and as a collective of outsiders. Consider the affinities they express in their references: Debord, Baudrillard, Dec, visionaries behind the spaghetti westerns—all of these are outsiders looking in at US democracy, politics, and art-making in various ways. The egalitarian spirit that represents all that is right and all that is wrong with the sphere of artistic production in the country led me to depend upon Tocqueville as my guide through the works of Radiohole. They are all theorists of worlds that cannot be—utopias, in many cases, and all of them work in opposition to the forces of accepted reality. Radiohole cannot work in a utopia, and so they stage the contradictions, joys, and errors of their work and lives under late capitalism. In a rare moment of explanation, Dyer admits of *Tarzana*: "I think what those characters have in common is literally us [...] I think it's really about Radiohole as an ensemble being together—our performance style, our approach to the work, and our ability to take disparate elements and make them coexist onstage, with a little more than a relationship of textures and maybe themes" (Tran 2015). Radiohole, as an entity, is the subject of its own process, performance, and modes of inquiry. They exemplify the glories and failures of radical democracy.

Radiohole's excess can thus be represented by the idea of another French theorist and critic, Georges Bataille; in many ways, Radiohole is the excess energy of the general economy. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille theorizes that certain energies need to be expended beyond those necessary for an economy to function; if these excesses are not released, they are mobilized for destructive forces—namely, war. Excess in gratification, such as that discussed by Tocqueville, mitigates the violent tendencies of capitalist regimes. Bataille writes, "independently of our consciousness, sexual reproduction is, together with eating and death, one of the great luxurious detours that ensure the intense consumption of energy" (1988, 35). What are these factors if not the ties that bind all Radiohole performances: sex, eating, death?

When I wrote about *Fluke* in 2006, I described Radiohole's work as hyperreal. But with hindsight and from the despair I feel in 2020, I understand that the hyperreal—beyond, supplanting the real—is not quite right, and I return to the visceral, political, and violent implications of excess. Excess itself is a type of beyond, but it connotes more important and grave repercussions with regard to waste, value, and shared resources; it is at once about the body and about late capitalism, performance, and institutional violence. The hyperreal is an important theoretical critique; excess is the very real work of shit and spreadsheets.

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In staging these impulses, in giving creative voice to the rawness of experience in the face of an oppressive set of political forces, Radiohole exposes basest needs, instincts, and fantasies of contemporary culture. These fantasies of excess create exciting, hilarious, and deeply affecting performances and by maintaining an ideal in process in which all voices are heard—no one reference, no one perspective is privileged in the work. Excess reveals the forms of liberation and oppression in democratic culture, and, by extension, artmaking. So when Douglass, in *Radiohole Is Still My Name*, bombastically claims, "If Radiohole goes to sleep, the rest of the world is in trouble. If we blink, the rest of the world will close their eyes. So we're not blinking, and we're not going to sleep. Our strategy at Radiohole will require us not to go to sleep," what she is really letting us know is that Radiohole is the only force keeping this powder keg of a culture from exploding.