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Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self (Critical Perspectives in Social Theory)

Randy Martin

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.Coming at a time when scarce attention is being paid to new sources for a political impulse in the West, *Performance as Political Act* seeks to re-embody the political subject, arguing that when the mind has been dominated by mass communications as in Western capitalism, the body emerges as a site of opposition. Martin's study goes against the conventional wisdom of the three areas it seeks to synthesize: politics, the performing arts, and the body. Whereas most left political studies presuppose consciousness as necessary for political activity, the author contends that consciousness is inadequate without political feeling and senses which are the province of the body. The performing arts, generally viewed from the audience's perspective, are here seen from the standpoint of the performers because the power of social relations, Martin asserts, lies ultimately in performance. Finally, the body, viewed in the relevant literature as either a natural, individual essence or as subjugated to mind is established here as a social, historical agent of political activity. Two distinct, yet related, studies form the basis for Martin's contention that an alternative politics must be based on the body engaged in performance: first, an inside view of the making of a modern dance displays the sources of power for a social body; and second, a comparison of political theatre in the Soviet twenties and American sixties identifies the way in which the body's potential for politics changes. A sustained theoretical discussion that critiques semiotic and phenomenological approaches to the body and outlines a body politics links the two studies.

Performing artists concerned with the political aspects of their work; sociologists engaged in the study of problems of culture and everyday life; and literary theorists involved with the application of the tools of literary criticism to political problems will find that the perspectives expressed in this groundbreaking examination of the contemporary theory and history of the body form a compelling argument for the extent to which the body can become a source of political activity.

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