# *The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes:* Feminist Consciousness-Raising as Performance Methodology

Diana Woodhouse, Lindsay Greer, and Olivia Perez-Langley

The art and philosophy of Aristotle, Seneca, Plato, and Marx, respectively turn to honeybee communities as models of human society. *The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes* extends these models. Recognizing the matriarchal organization and cooperative/collaborative labor of apiary communities, the feminist collaborators of this staged production deployed the honeybee as a metaphor for highlighting women's relationship to language, media, labor, and each other. Through poetry interpretation, abstract movement, and experimental film, *The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes* intentionally blurs the roles of women in contemporary society with the duties and expectations of the honeybee colony's female workers and queen bee.

**Consciousness Raising**

*The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes* was performed in April 2013 in the Marion Kleinau Theatre of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Conceptualized as a performance art piece by Diana Woodhouse, Lindsay Greer, and Olivia Perez-Langley, *The Leaky Architecture's* three feminist collaborators em-

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**Diana Woodhouse** is an Instructor of Communication at the College of Southern Nevada, and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Feminist theory informs her research in performance studies, critical communication pedagogy, and visual rhetoric. **Lindsay Greer** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She holds an M.F.A. in Mass Communication and Media Arts from SIUC. Her work uses arts based research methods in the areas of performance studies, poetry, media archeology, and visual culture. **Olivia Perez-Langley** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. A global feminist approach informs her research in performance praxis, intercultural communication, and Latin@ communication studies.
**Note**: selections of the performance can be viewed at <http://liminalities.net/11-2/leaky.html>

ployed consciousness-raising as performance methodology. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell describes consciousness-raising as a critical inquiry process involving intimate and non-hierarchical group discussions among women (400). By forming a collective base of shared experiences through conversation, Campbell reasons, consciousness-raising practitioners are better able to recognize their perceived shortcomings and personal insufficiencies as politically cultivated realities (ibid.). Stated differently, consciousness raising functions to empower women by cognitively unveiling their systematic oppression; merging with performance practice, consciousness raising then incites participants to enact local changes within sites of culture and embodiment.



fig. 1: Lindsay Greer, Marion Kleinau Theatre; photo by Jonathan M. Gray

Kay Ellen Capo and Darlene M. Hantzis map connections between performance and consciousness-raising. More specifically, the authors argue that by using performance to interrogate our culturally regulated identities, we can break and remake the social constructions that constitute our gendered selves (252). *The Leaky Architecture's* collaborators echo Capo and Hantzis, recognizing consciousness raising as a performance methodology that is well suited for nurturing artistic insights, building feminist community, and transforming our selves.

Prior to textual selection and the formal staging process, performance collaborators engaged in consciousness-raising sessions. For roughly six months

and through dozens of conversations, we shared openly with each other our political commitments and artistic inspirations as feminist performers and critics. We also exchanged personal experiences and insecurities as women—those things we disliked about our selves and our worlds. With a mutual trust of support and witnessing in place, we examined and re-examined each of these commitments, inspirations, and experiences along gendered, personal, and patriarchal lines; we pushed back on each other by asking where subjective responsibility and potential agency had been neglected, taken away, or given up by ourselves and others. Using consciousness raising as a mode of collaborative inquiry, we approached this recursive process of examination as a tool for etching the aesthetic and theoretical terrain of our stage production.



fig. 2: Lindsay Greer and Diana Woodhouse, Marion Kleinau Theatre;
photo by Jonathan M. Gray

Through these consciousness-raising sessions we selected honeybees as a generative metaphor for feminist liberation efforts. Feminists work tirelessly to highlight and transform hegemony, and to nurture and resuscitate the weakened psyches of women and men under patriarchal rule. Through their pollination efforts honeybees work tirelessly, too—fighting with sting and giving their own lives in service of Earthen nurture and renewal. It was with these similarities in mind that the honeybee functioned as a feminist avatar. More specifically, the honeybee crystallized for the collaborators the ongoing tension between right-

eous anger and sacrificial nourishment that feminist activists must constantly negotiate. This metaphor was then extended and reinforced through textual selection, directorial techniques, and collaborative staging choices.

**Language**

Capo and Hantzis situate language deconstruction at the methodological intersection of feminist and performance practices (252-3). As such, deconstruction played an important role in *The Leaky Architecture*'s textual selection and staging choices. As a critical linguistic operation, deconstruction functions to expose the binary differences that construct our social realities. Many feminists employ deconstructive methods—first, in order to map Western epistemology as maze of binary dualisms (e.g.: mind/body, thinking/feeling, rationality/emotion, culture/nature), and second, to highlight the ways that binary language associates and conflates women with those devalued terms (Cixous 887). In light of its critical and feminist import, deconstruction played a key role in poetic selection and staging processes of *The Leaky Architecture*.

*Poetry*

The poetry of Kim Addonizio, Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, Li-Young Lee, Muriel Rukeyser, and Lindsay Greer comprised our compiled script. Julia Kristeva makes a feminist case for poetic language, arguing that it can function to interrupt the linguistic binaries that devalue women. According to Kristeva, traditional or symbolic language operates through masculine logics of binary opposition and non-contradiction, whereas poetic language is linked to nonlinear, rhythmic, and "semiotic" modes of expression. Poetic language, then, can serve feminist ends by subverting and transgressing the distinct categories that are proffered through binary language and its grammatical rules. Capo and Hantzis underscore this point, similarly explaining how poetic language can "employ imaginative gestures while eluding the logical balance, descriptive simplicity, oppositional structures, and forced closure of [traditional] rhetoric" (253). Through our selection of poetic texts, *Leaky Architecture* collaborators enacted a linguistic commitment to deconstructive modes. This commitment was then visually and physically reinforced through our staging choices.

*Staging*

Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard highlights a consistent preoccupation in women's art with internal/external and private/public binary divisions. Lippard notes, "Interiors are seen in women's literature as prisons *and* sanctuaries. In the visual arts, women's images of enclosed space convey either confinement, or else freedom within confinement" (74 emphasis added). These binary tensions resonated with *The Leaky Architecture's* women collaborators. More specifically, we sought to highlight and deconstruct them through our set and blocking choices. In our staged production, the boxes and borderlines that constitute and con-

strain our gendered identities were visually symbolized by a large two-dimensional square laminated onto center stage. These visual boundaries were then alternately breached and maintained throughout the staged performance: protected by the box, we shared a world of laughter and joy; constrained by the box, we maligned each other and died within its walls; recognizing the box, we were empowered and reborn as queen bees outside of it.

Dwight Conquergood identifies performativity as a kinetic force that can empower individuals by breaking and remaking culture and the self (138). *The Leaky Architecture* collaborators invoked this notion of performativity and sought to enact its power through our staging choices. Whether the performers collapsed inside of the box's perimeter, tip-toed along its border, or hurled our bodies through its constructed bounds, the critical focus remained on visually highlighting for the audience the box as a construction, and our bodies as instruments of agency and compliance. Both avowing and transgressing the box's bounds, we sought to highlight the psychological, physiological, and legal boundaries that restrain our gendered identities, while also re-presenting them as leaky, permeable, and discursive.

**Media**

Women's media representation was a central concern for *The Leaky Architecture's* feminist collaborators. Specifically, we strove to spotlight the consumption and display of dead woman in popular media. Poet Kim Addonozio underscores this media fetishization, writing that "Dead Girls/show up often in the movies, facedown/in the weeds beside the highway . . . . Detectives stand over them in studio apartments/ or lift their photos off pianos/ in the houses they almost grew up in. A dead girl can kick a movie into gear/better than a saloon brawl, better/than a factory explosion, just/by lying there" (45). Through our textual selection and interpretation of Kim Addonizio's "Dead Girls," we aimed to highlight this media fetish for dead women's bodies as a manifestation of the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey identifies the male gaze as a standard optic structuring numerous artifacts of visual culture. This gendered gaze, Mulvey argues, casts women as passive objects to be looked at and men as active subjects who do the looking (62). As the perfect submissive, the overly represented dead women functions as the ideal object of the male gaze. She is fetishized in Disney movies as the petrified Snow White, who—ever virginal and pure—awaits her prince's kiss inside a glass coffin.. Police dramas and crime scene shows frequently open with a bludgeoned and mutilated female corpse—often times, a former lover's punishment for her lascivious or two-timing ways.

In these instances, the sexually experienced woman will be killed off as penance for her sins; no longer retaining animate agency over her body, her past "transgressions" are smoothed over like pale innocent skin. The dead woman's

reoccurring role within popular media fulfills a voyeuristic desire to look at a subject who cannot return the stare. Men want her. Women want to be her. She is full of mystery. People cry over her fragile body as she is mourned—forever poised at the edge of her full potential.



fig. 3: Diana Woodhouse and Lindsay Greer, Marion Kleinau Theatre; photo by Jonathan M. Gray

Through our textual selection and interpretation of Kim Addonizio's "Dead Girls," *The Leaky Architecture's* feminist collaborators sought to highlight and redirect women's lifelessness as building block of the male gaze. Meeting the audience's gaze and breaking the fourth wall, Diana's rendering of the poem is forceful, assertive, and accusatory. Through this deliberate staging, we aimed to interrupt the representational codes that alternately romanticize the dead woman as sacrificial virgin or eroticize her as penitent whore. As feminist collaborators, we sought not to deny or elide the murders and extensive abuses of women, but rather to nuance these atrocities as more than tawdry plot devices. Rather than zipping Lindsay's "corpse" into a medical body bag before flashing to the next scene, we aimed to reinforce women's death as a material, linguistic, and affective burden that is continually shouldered by women.

**Labor**

Throughout the rehearsal process Lindsay's knees bore the physical brunt falling to the floor when performing as "dead girl." A role seemingly void of material labor, her bruised body tells otherwise. Sandra Bartky argues that, through their repeated and unreturned dispensation of affective and domestic labor, women strengthen the energies of children and men while depleting their own life force and alienating themselves (117). Women's bodies, then, are material storehouses for the affective labor that we are socialized to endure, and Lindsay's stage injuries parallel this asymmetrical dispensation of physical and caregiving labor.

*The Leaky Architecture* collaborators sought to highlight women's hidden domestic and affective labor for audience members. In order to do so, we employed that which Elin Diamond calls a gestic feminist criticism. According to Diamond, a gestic feminist criticism allows for "the social attitudes [about gender to] . . . become visible to the spectator . . . . [through] a gesture, a word, an action, [or] a tableau" (129). Bartky helps to clarify these social attitudes, arguing that within capitalist economies, wherein women make less money than men, women are unevenly expected to offer both domestic maintenance *and* affective caregiving to their male partners in exchange of economic support (101). In preparation for this exchange and in order to avoid conflict, Anne Ferguson reasons, women are socialized to find satisfaction in the gratification of others' needs and to place their own needs as secondary (*Blood* 133). Meanwhile, men "learn that such skills are women's work, [and as a result, they] learn to demand nurturance from women yet don't know how to nurture themselves" (Ferguson "Women" 20-1). *The Leaky Architecture* collaborators aimed to highlight this exploited domestic and affective labor by enacting varied scrubbing, cleansing, and folding tableaus throughout the performance.

In viewing these repetitious movement choreographies, we wanted audience members to register caregiving labor as alienating albatross that is shouldered by women, as well as a gift or survival strategy that is reciprocally gifted from one woman to another. Sitting together inside the box, Diana mimes a tableau of swaddling, folding, and presenting an invisible offering to Lindsay's cupped hands. Happily receiving this gift, Lindsay then dumps the invisible entity outside of the box's bounds. Repeated four times, the tableau touches variously and simultaneously on the expectation and disposal of women's affective labor by men, the lack of public valuation and representation given to women's caregiving and domestic labor, and the power of reciprocal emotional labor as bonding ritual in many women-to-women relationships.

## Conclusion

*The Leaky Architecture's* feminist collaborators recognize women's relationships to language, media, labor, and each other as formidable shapers of gender identity. Using honeybees as generative metaphor, we aimed to stage and re-imagine these relationships.

Illustrated in Virgil's *Georgics,* the apiary virtues of loyalty and selflessness have served since antiquity as models for moral and political renewal (Perkell 212). However, in contemporary society, global populations of bees are steadily dying off at alarming rates. Biologists connect the decline of bee populations to man's development of industry and technology and the resulting destruction of delicate ecosystems, while scientists draw potential correlations between the extinction of bees and the demise of the human race. *The Leaky Architecture of Beehives and Boxes* sought to parallel the decline of bees at human hands to the diminished spirit of the human race under patriarchy's grasp—while simultaneously offering visions of beauty, resilience, and hope.

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