

Preface to *Timelines: Writing and Conversations*

On my desk are several pieces of paper with handwritten notes on how I might introduce my book. I also have a blue leather notepad in which I recorded passing observations as I sat by the Hudson River over several months last year, in a small upstate town. That setting had taken the place of the library or cafe I would normally go to with my work to find a neutral space away from home. The flow of the River carried me back and forth in time, for it was in this region that many Revolutionary War battles were fought, and where Alexander Hamilton, of whom we have heard much lately, had married into a prominent Albany family, and the landscape painter Thomas Cole was already lamenting the despoliation of the landscape two decades before the Civil War. Farther down the Hudson Valley, Franklin Roosevelt always returned on election eve to his beloved home at Hyde Park. Close by is the site of the old Catskill depot, where steamboats coming up from New York City would dock, and their passengers disembark to take the stagecoach to the most famous mountaintop hotel in America. With the hundredth anniversary last summer of women attaining the right to vote, I am also reminded of the most brilliant woman of her time, the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, who once got off the boat here in town. On the other side of the River, Amtrak trains run along the tracks. But no longer are their cars filled with excited travelers visiting upstate towns, nor can they cross the Canadian border.

In the riverfront park known as Dutchman's Landing, a reminder of the area's early colonizers, young parents hold the hands of their little masked children. A socially distanced art club gathers to hold an afternoon painting session. There is a Sunday get together for the local Black congregation. A few hikers follow the wooded trails, hoping to find Indian arrowheads. My thoughts are stirred in the fast currents of the Hudson, interrupted occasionally by the sound of speedboats rushing toward the whimsically named Rip Van Winkle Bridge. Sitting at a picnic table, I look over the piles of collected texts that threaten to blow away. It occurs to me that I write essays in lieu of a memoir. Sometimes, like the townspeople scattered about the lawn, I am stretched out on a lounge chair reading by the water—Rachel Carson, Isabel Wilkerson, James Baldwin, Masha Gessen. Twilight signals the daily ritual of watching the gorgeous sunset. What a strange time it has been! Here, so much beauty and calm beneath the encircling seagulls, while all around the country suffering and death and poverty and anger. By what turn of fortune, I wonder, can I accept the

consolation of nature and the joy of a good day's work? Following the wisdom of many philosophers and writers through the ages, I conclude that it is important to preserve a part of yourself from the world. A deeply felt privacy.

The year 2020 brought one of the most catastrophic times in the post-war period, in the form of a coronavirus that cast a great cloud of unknowing over the globe. What will happen, where are we going, who will we become? This extraordinary situation has taken hold everywhere and threatens all aspects of human existence. First came the initial shock and feelings of fear and isolation, then the accompanying attempts to process the weight of it all. To clear the mental space for any kind of creativity proved challenging, but for those fortunate enough to do so, this new slow time became an opportunity for considering fundamental life questions in between the pauses for daily necessities.

Surveying political events as they unfolded here and abroad, there were times I felt like I was living in a Witkiewicz play, with an outsized and fuming tyrant held in place by a pack of scheming sycophants, a world where time and space and language are distorted on shifting planes of reality. What also came to mind were those thirties' and forties' film comedies that take place in a fictitious old Europe, such as the Marx Brothers' classic *Duck Soup*, whose ministers and functionaries scramble to satisfy the head of state's increasingly crazed whims. The reality of the times we are living in grew more terrifying when an insurrection by American citizens dressed up as faux revolutionaries, and brandishing weaponized props, stormed the Capitol, revealing a democracy as fragile as a windowpane.

Great political and social upheavals have called forth transformational art movements and means of production in the histories of modernity. Tragically, they have also ushered in absolutist politics and purges on the left and the right, which should serve as a severe warning for the future. This contemporary moment calls out for artistic forces to rethink their ways of working and organizing and valuing. In terms of the theatre culture, now is the time for a fearless awakening of contemporary practices, eliciting new models of writing and performing. If drama, the mainstay of the theatrical repertoire, is predicated on the search for truth, to explore what that means in an era that has disavowed its very idea opens up a resounding field of inquiry. Looked at from another perspective, the forced absence of all live arts provokes new equations of online performance and spectatorship that are certain to impact their evolution. What depths of the human imagination lie in wait in our darkened theatres?

Here I am now in New York City, months later, and with some more notes. I thought it would be simple to write down my reflections. Oh, I could summarize the qualities of artworks that I seek out, and the artists and thinkers I value, or the historical events and cultural politics that absorb me. Even my interest in the moral and the aesthetic, work ethics, the search for new forms. If I think back over the twelve years of writings and conversations that comprise my book, I have the feeling that I have forgotten how to tell time. It has gone either too fast or too slow. There is so vast a field of human interaction to comprehend. The sense of it has changed over the last year, and with it, my own relationship to the selections in TIMELINES, and their relation to each other. I cannot decide if what I have written is less attached to its time and place, or more attached to it than ever. That is what happens when the work begins to live its own life in the world.

New York City

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