

Unreliable Witness

Martin Patrick

Performance Art history is built upon a very shaky foundation, a co-mingling of hearsay and urban legends, second-hand rumours and blurred documentation. On the whole, entirely inconclusive evidence acts as its principle supporting mechanism. Moreover, don't any attempts to challenge this mechanism become irrelevant, as isn't this part of the game? Can the notion of accurately recording and analyzing the fleeting, the instantaneous, and the evanescent really make much sense? Thus, instead of attempting to construct full-fledged critical and/or scholarly arguments in this space, I'd for the moment prefer to offer the following handful of purely anecdotal and speculative digressions.

(1) Tabloid-style performance studies

In 1972, then-*Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes reported that the Viennese Aktionist Rudolf Schwarzkogler 'deduced that what really counts is not the application of paint, but the removal of surplus flesh. So he proceeded, inch by inch, to amputate his own penis, while a photographer recorded the act as an art event. ... Successive acts of self-amputation finally did Schwarzkogler in.'¹ Hughes used Schwarzkogler as a symptomatic figure representing the 'decline' in the status of the avant-garde. This bit of reportage was completely erroneous in a number of ways—the artist did *not* amputate his own penis and did *not* die from wounds related to 'self-amputation'—but finally the most significant aspect is that the 'reportage' of Hughes was taken by many to be factually correct for years.

In the same article, Hughes takes pains—so to speak—to ridicule another of the artist's Viennese colleagues Hermann Nitsch, well known for his Orgiastic Mysteries Theatre, a curious and cathartic blend of the gothic and pastoral often featuring naked youths, slaughtered animals, and buckets of blood. However the one time I saw Nitsch 'in performance' in a (pretty much empty) lower Manhattan venue, I was confronted with a hirsute, grey gent awkwardly hovering over an organ, making ominous sounds, as he was simultaneously downing a prodigious amount of lager. The next time I re-encountered the artist (by chance) he was lucidly expounding upon the role of performance in a public interview at an academic art symposium. The academicization of performance art is perhaps more of a testament to the avant-garde's historical resilience than that of the critical acumen of Mr. Hughes, today more likely to be writing about 19th Century Romanticism than the continuing resurgence of body and performance art. Hughes was certainly not alone in his disdain for live art, for example coverage of Chris Burden's earliest works appeared as sensationalist fodder for soft core porn mags and sketchy alternative newspapers, with the first substantive profile on his work in *Artforum* arriving only rather belatedly in 1976.²

(2) Performance is everywhere (as is Elvis P.)

'I want to do a show!!!' says my three-year-old daughter as she herself perches rather

unsteadily on a second-hand trampoline. Like any arguably more seasoned performance artist, Oki wants my attention and she wants it NOWWWW! Her emphatically stated intention to 'do a show' is in effect the core aspect of so many performance-based works, although the more spectacular quotient has been adjusted in recent years. That is to say, the orientation has shifted more towards audience/participation as if some delayed aftershock/reappraisal of the Happenings, Aktionen, and Fluxus-style goings-on of the 1960s and 70s, or the golden age that never was. And to a great degree, the 'shows' promoted by my daughter—or any number of her young peers—often bear a strong resemblance to the game-like procedures featured in the preceding archaic movements. The inchoate, ephemeral 'childlike' goals of such ringmasters as Maciunas, Higgins, Filliou, Kaprow, et al., are clearly much more easily achieved if one is actually a card-carrying child rather than an elderly imposter.

To catch regular glimpses of the raw, unchecked enthusiasm of small children has the disturbing effect of offering you a goblet of youth-truth serum that once you've reached for it, dissolves mirage-like into the ether. *Fuck*. Performance for that matter rapidly traverses temporal and spatial boundaries via its very immediacy, but now also seems ubiquitous. Who is NOT a performer today? Or, perhaps one might ask, how does one categorize, differentiate, and highlight 'performance art' vs. all the other types of performance (televisual, marketing, theatre, busking, sports, music)? The seminal Polish performance artist Zbigniew Warpechowski has commented mischievously that such endeavors as performance and poetry are 'second-class' arts, while the only arts of 'first-class' status currently are 'rock and roll, opera, football, and painting'.

(3) Performance and Ideology

Critical portrayals of performance art are wholly indivisible from ideological bias. At one time, the young tough male, incurring repetitive Saint Sebastian-lite wounds became the 'it boy' (Acconci, Burden), or later the female goddess-evoking visionaries (Antin, Montano, Rosenthal, Schneemann) were privileged above all others. But more prevalent than these parallel scenarios are—at least in certain contexts—the ideologically driven attacks on performance that accuse artists of involvement in (a) hedonistic, pointless acts, (b) sacrilegious, blasphemous undertakings (this is the fallback in the USA), (c) indulging in debased non-art, and/or (d) thieving from the populace via their grant or fellowship support. [space to insert another alphabetized complaint here] It's no accident that the post-1980s culture wars in the United States have involved incidents featuring performance art. Such as when the National Endowment for the Arts was pressured by conservative politicians, culminating in the withholding of grants to the so-called 'NEA Four': John Fleck, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller by then-NEA Chair John Frohnmayer, who feared political repercussions, as the aforementioned artists were known for their uncensored and direct approaches to performance. By the mid-1990s, the NEA had been essentially drained dry of funding, power, and the possibility of supporting any art that might be considered even slightly unconventional or controversial. Perhaps ironically, this occurred during the tenure of President Clinton, an ostensibly liberal Democrat. But as history plainly shows, when politicians have a rocky period, the arts are a minor concern, and are generally considered expendable.

Moreover the most important performance works are often perceived as dangerous, risky, and threatening, precisely because they serve to upend and confound received notions and ideological alliances. A few examples: The most memorable performance workshop I ever participated in was a term-long course of study with Linda Montano, whose deep commitment to performance was truly unnerving and overwhelming particularly for a paper-pushing non-performing student like myself; most memorable performance-related exhibition was at the recent Sydney Biennale (re-)witnessing—and cringing at—historic documentation of Mike Parr's arduous feats of physical endurance while surrounded by buckets of shit, urine, and who knows what. Furthermore, with the realization that performance now holds a 'status' conferred both historically and institutionally, it can also be messed with, reinvoked and twisted to fit the ends of new practitioners like the artists featured recently at Enjoy; whether investigating public perception of the artist's role (Vivien Atkinson), treading irreverently on the pop/art divide (Gemma Syme), or donning the garb and adopting the (culinary) skills of a different field (Chris Brady).

(4) Pranks and Personality

A postgraduate colleague of mine some years ago began posting signs around our large American campus announcing the allegedly imminent visit of one Professor Joseph Beuys, headlined 'Genius or Charlatan?' Of course many of the 'local' professors and students upon whom we didn't confer much respect were unaware that Prof. Beuys had exited this mortal coil a good half decade earlier. Such activities are widespread of course. More recently, in a kind of converse fashion, artist Adam McEwen exhibited premature obituaries of celebrities such as Bill Clinton and Nicole Kidman in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Interventionist pranks, once featured in a wildly entertaining REsearch[J Booth1] book, are often indistinguishable from much 'proper' performance work.³ When does a satirical gesture become performance art? When does an activist protest constitute a performance? Why are so many performances in which almost nothing happens considered performances? All of the above merely calls attention once again to how personality, its framing, and the activation of one's art persona serves as a major element of so many performance works.

(5) New Performance: The (Sampled) Spectacle's the Thing

In the more recent virtual and mediated performance ventures of this new century, the outright fictional is forefronted such that questions of authenticity and verisimilitude become anachronistic and meaningless. Hoaxes, hacking, and humour have offered considerable fuel for newer collectives such as the Yes Men. Avatars, screens, and texts have displaced bodies, screams, and scores. Just where, when, and *how* is the performance? Perhaps keys to some of this exist in the simultaneous merging of past and present as artists remix, reenact and recapture the lost time of performance. Just as divas such as Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono and Patti Smith 'replay' past performances, so occur new digital 'cyberperformances,' events, and festivals, incorporating temporal works by musicians, DJs, and sound artists such as Brian Eno, Paul D. Miller, or Rolf Julius. We might ask *where* is the time of current art, if today fragmentary and semi-fictive documentation now becomes part of the 'whole package,' as the phenomenon of performance enters a new era, with altogether different historical situations and technologies with which to contend. We are living and even breathing within new

mediated contexts, environments, and interfaces. Just to define performance is a task in itself given all that, but perhaps this brave, new hybrid world of streaming video, chatrooms, webcasts, and interactive art conferencing can inform in a revealing manner the more visceral, tangible, and confrontational moves of the past, such that artists may make the most of the specific challenges presented by this interdisciplinary moment.

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¹ Robert Hughes, "The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde," *Time*, December 18, 1972.

² Robert Horvitz, "Chris Burden," *Artforum*, Vol. XIV, No. 9, May 1976.

³ V. Vale, *Pranks! RE/Search #11* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1987).