

Performance Art As Politicized Epistemology

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Without invoking a traditional definition of art, we could say that performance art is performance as art. It is variously referred to as 'impermanent art', 'live art', 'happenings', and sometimes called 'body art'. The National Endowment for the Arts (N.E.A.) in America defines performance art as "performance occurring in a visual art context."¹ The performance artist Tom Marioni defines it as, "Idea oriented situations not directed at the production of static objects."² If we combine the above two definitions we could say that performance art is a representational activity which occurs in a visual art context and avoids the production of static objects.

In seeking what is significant about performance activities we might consider a distinction Aristotle draws in his *Metaphysics* between an action which is its own end and an action which produces something beyond the activity. He writes:

Now, the doing of an action is its own end, as seeing is the end of vision; and from the activity of seeing no further product results. But there are other activities which produce something: housebuilding produces a house, which exists apart from the activity of building ... In general, a movement is in the thing being moved. But where there is no other product beyond the activity, there the action is inherent in the agent; seeing is in him who sees; knowing, in him who knows; and living is in the actually living being.³

In other words, there are activities and there are activities which produce byproducts. Following Aristotle we allow two types of activity: one distinguished from the other according to whether some product exists at the end of the activity. But we must also say what these two types of activity have in common. What makes an activity, that is, what makes something a discrete particular cohesive object is not, for Aristotle, dependent upon whether some product exists at the end of a series of actions, but instead, Aristotle's two types of activity have in common their dependence on an intention - which is what serves to delineate the boundaries of activity. In this context, what much of performance art seems to be doing is playing back and forth between these two types of activity: 1) activity whose intentionality finds exposition in the creation of an artifact and, 2) activity whose intentionality lacks an artifact.

To say that performance art is simply performance as art doesn't tell much of anything unless we are willing to submit some elaborate definition of art which we could then fit performance art back into as a particular kind of art. This seems to be the method which a number of philosophers of art and commentators favor when confronted by a set of new phenomena whose practitioners, either implicitly or explicitly, lay claim to the 'artness' of their endeavors. These theoreticians trot out their standardized and standardizing shibboleths as if these catch phrases do indeed catch all there is to catch about one activity or another. Thus we can see the meagerness of this kind of theoretizing in the NEA's dictum that performance art is "performance occurring in a visual art context." This definition tells us nothing except where performance art takes place.

The question of what position performance art ought to occupy in the artworld should be postponed in the hopes of first formulating an explanation of the thrust of performance art as activity. Performance is representational regardless of its status as art. Performance art's vacillation between embodied and non-embodied intentionality serves to expose the purposes which underlie not only particular representations but also the mechanism of representationality itself. The mission of performance art may be the attempt to illuminate representationality without confining itself to an existence as just another representation. Performance art is a political epistemology insofar as it uncovers the intentions (political) which underpin the roles of representations (epistemology).

Bruce Barber, in an essay entitled, "The Social Performer," quotes from Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*:

As more and more people find themselves working at jobs beneath their abilities, as leisure and sociability themselves take on the qualities of work, the posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant mode of everyday intercourse. Many forms of popular art appeal to this sense of knowingness and thereby reinforce it. They parody familiar roles and themes, inviting the audience to consider itself superior to its surroundings. Popular forms begin to parody themselves: westerns take off on westerns; Soap operas like *Fernwood*, *Soap*, and *Mary Hartman*, *Mary Hartman* assure the viewer of his own sophistication by mocking the conventions of soap opera.⁴

Barber goes on to write, "Some form[s] of 'high' art do the same thing, its practitioners showing the same kind of cynical detachment afflicting writers and producers of Soap or *Mary Hartman*. High art begins to parody high art." Barber calls this parodying 'imaging' and says that it, "the result of excessive self-attention, is a shifting from one role and its projected, reflected image to another, without one of them becoming dominant."⁵

In other words, Barber argues that performance art becomes useless parody because the lack of a concrete representation simply allows the artist/performer the flexibility to change roles more often and more quickly. Barber fears that the lack of an external concrete medium of expression has often resulted in the artist/performer turning in upon himself as not only the medium of expression but also the content, source, and focus of expression. Thus we end up with performance as narcissism.

What Barber ignores is the potential legitimacy of a turning inward as the stuff of performance. This turning inward is a legitimate response to an aesthetic tradition. So much of the tradition, until recently, has consisted of a focus on the production of static representations (which implies the eclipse of the artist's intentions according to what purposes the representational work is successively put). Given the argument in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, that much of Western art has been produced specifically as commodity, which includes the increasing commodification and industrialization of art and artists, Barber's discomfort as a narcissistic tendency in performance art (of the

1970's) seems to be a begging of the question.⁶ I agree with Barber that "parody may not be enough ... "; enough (presumably) to constitute whatever it is we mean by 'high' art, but at this juncture parody in performance art ought to be seen as legitimate and important.

Here a sociological analogy may serve to illustrate the complexities of mimicry and parody. In the late 1960's and early 1970's as gay men began to form larger and more public (i.e. visible) communities, they simultaneously adopted a curious uniform: the uniform by which one gay man could recognize another was often the uniform which the gays' perceived victimizers wore. That is, gay men began to fashion themselves in the clothing of, for example, construction workers. One of the impulses for wearing the clothing of one's oppressors is the perception that by so doing we somehow transcend an enemy threat. By identifying with one's oppressors the subject places himself above the particular stations of victimizer and victim. Performance artists, as one element of the avant-garde movement, have constituted themselves as a group in the last 15 years according to a mechanism not unlike that of gay men. That is performance artists both adapt to and transcend particular aspects of the tradition in which they find themselves working.

If we recall Aristotle's distinction between activities which produce products beyond the activity itself and activities for which the product is the activity itself we can then consider performance art and the way in which it deals with products (representations) along these same lines. Performance art carries out a dialectic between these two sorts of activity. Ostensibly, performance art produces no representations. This is true insofar as performance artists by and large do not create tangible representational objects, so that their activity might be seen as some sort of 'back to' art activity; as if art could ever (a) go back anywhere, or, (b) somehow be non-representational. 'Representational' does not here mean that one thing must stand for something else, but rather, that something embodies an intention. This is an attempt to telescope the definition of representation from something that stands for something else to simply something that stands. And something stands insofar as it is a product of human (read social) activity.

It would be false to assert that performance art is non-representational in this latter sense of representation. Instead, we should say that performance art is perhaps the most representational activity. That is, there are two senses in which performance art is super-representational. First, by avoiding a traditional art impulse to embody an intention as a concrete representation, performance artists construe their intentions as performers and not merely as fabricators. The second sense in which performance art is super-representational is that the material (the subject matter) of performance art is often the nature of representations and the activity of representing.

The focus of performance art, in other words, is upon the performer and the performance and not what the performer and performance may or may not stand for. This should not be taken to mean that performance art is just another attempt at contentless art, but

rather, that performance art has as its content the art activity par excellence: representation.

It would appear then that performance art is a curiously self-enclosed activity; that performance art deals with representations of itself and itself as represented. This recalls Barber's criticism against what he sees as the narcissistic tendency in performance art. Perhaps performance art does in its end result remain in Aristotle's camp of activities which have no product beyond themselves. This conclusion would be irrelevant if performance art activity, whether or not it produces things beyond itself, is nevertheless an entirely significant mode of activity.

If it is legitimate to assert that performance art's significance lies in its revealing of intentions and associations through the orchestration of images, then it would be correct to judge performance art's success according to how deeply its revelations cut. In her performances Laurie Anderson is adept at reminding the audience of the multiplicity of readings which an image can portray. In her, "United States, Part IV", Anderson offers a tableau composed of zodiac signs and airplane. Anderson also reproduces on screen a picture of a three-pronged electrical outlet. By illuminating this picture from the rear the image is transformed into a face. These effects are clever manipulations, but do they reveal anything beyond a certain glib playfulness? Contrast in this context the work of Boston artist Alex Grey. Two of Grey's pieces, "Prayer Wheel" and "Fertile Mother", serve as incantations which call forth not simply the ritualistic sources of imaging but which prod one not to forget the sensuous impact of representations. Grey's work can be construed as an attempt to recollect and reveal the sheer physicality which permeates our image-making activity but which comes to be concealed due to the image-dexterity we have acquired.

In Walter Benjamin's, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", he writes eloquently of how art objects and hence art activity were irreversibly transformed with the advent of the reproducibility of art objects. Since works of art have always been, technically speaking, reproducible, it is not reproducibility per se which alters the nature of art, but rather, it is the specific manner in which works of art are reproducible which has the transformative effect.

The ease with which mechanical reproduction occurs, coupled with the potential for mass reproduction of art objects is what gives weight to the revolutionary significance of mechanical reproduction. Thus, for example, it is the capabilities of mechanizing lithography which transform the art of printmaking. The transformation of art due to its mechanical reproducibility occurs in the first place as a negative effect. What is negated or subtracted from the work of art is what Benjamin terms its 'aura', which he explains as the 'authority of the object'. He writes:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the

history which it has experienced ... And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.⁷

Mechanical reproduction, since it allows for the possibility of an object having its tradition snatched from it, Benjamin then argues, has implications beyond the realm of art. In order to discern what these implications are and in which direction they tend we must keep in mind precisely that it is the authority of the object and its tradition which are negated with the onslaught of mechanical reproduction. We could say that it is the uniqueness of a work of art which mechanical reproduction invades. With the invasion of the uniqueness of the art object simultaneously is lost the artwork as ritual object. And if artworks can no longer serve as ritual objects they are thus emancipated and lay ready at hand to serve whatever purpose their next appropriator bestows upon them.

In discussing the role that an artwork plays in the import of an art activity it is perhaps helpful to consider what Nelson Goodman has said about changing the traditional question of 'what is art' to 'when is art'.⁸ On the face of it it seems as if Goodman's distinction is not too subtle; it implies a shift from the qualities of a *stable* object to *when* (now transient) an object portrays qualities. But by temporalizing the question as to what is 'anchoring' in art Goodman turns the entire problem on end. Instead of asking what the intentions of the art-maker (doer?) are and then seeking those intentions as embodied in an art object or activity, Goodman slowly eclipses the intentions of the art-maker and considers the intentions, thoughts, and actions of the art-user. Artness becomes a question not of how something is and when something is made but rather how and when something is consumed. Goodman's formula for art stresses the activities and intentions of the person who re-appropriates art objects.

If it is indeed the consumer who is the artist it seems that if we knew Goodman's formula of art 20 years ago we might have been able to predict that artists would turn from the fabrication of objects to an assessment of how the 'new' artist thinks and acts. Thus we end up in the curious position in which the contemporary performance artist is in effect aping the activities and intentions of the consumer artist.

To talk of artists as consumers is not merely pejorative; it is a step in locating performance art within the modernist tradition. In the modernist tradition, broadly speaking, the artist is not the individual who merely experiences and gives expression to experience, but the person who recapitulates experience, and, in recapitulating experience exemplifies the structure and coherence (or lack thereof) of experience. That is, modernism has to do with the form and process of recollection. It is this aspect of modernism which Marcuse, in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, considers to be the truly revolutionary and therefore potentially emancipatory function of art. Marcuse quotes Horkheimer and Adorno's statement that 'all reification is a forgetting', and then goes on himself to conclude:

If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions.⁹

What has been suppressed in previous revolutions is the re-appropriation, not of objects, but of the form of recollections. Recollection has failed to become fully realized as a motive force for revolution because recollection has always occurred as recollection of some object or activity. The aim of recollection is not to bring past objects as embodied intentions to light but rather to illuminate activity as recollection — that is, the non-reification of activity as remembrance of things past.

Goodman construes this activity as one of the 'ways of worldmaking'. Marcuse (and here it is only in his language that he differs from Goodman) considers the Utopian character of non-reifying recollection. Benjamin, however, sees the danger of liberating art from its reifying context in ritual. Benjamin believes that when art is no longer bound up with ritual its potential for misuse is vast. Benjamin in fact comes to see fascism as one of the inevitable results of the consumer as artist.

The politicization of art, which comes about through art having been liberated from ritual (i.e. made available for other purposes) because of the transformation which mechanical reproducibility affects, in fascism means that the masses have been encouraged to express themselves while maintaining the existing property relations. Here we should note with Benjamin that it isn't the case that art becomes political, but rather, that fascism is the bringing of art into politics — about which Benjamin writes that "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war ... Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system"¹⁰. Benjamin goes on to quote at length from the Futurist Marinetti's manifesto on the Ethiopian war:

For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as antiaesthetic ... accordingly we state: ... War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dream of metalization of the human body.¹¹

The above Futurist manifesto is important to our investigation because the Futurists have been alternately pointed to as either the precursors or founders of performance art. What have often been termed the 'absurdist' performances of the Futurists have nonetheless an unmistakable political ring to them, as witnessed by the violence which many of the Futurist performances instigated.

Although Benjamin's essay is highly illuminating in its assessment of the relationship of aesthetics to politics, it seems that his dichotomy that fascism represents the bringing of art into politics while communism represents the politicization of art is facile. What remains intriguing however is Benjamin's insight into the dynamic of the relationship of

art to politics. Benjamin, like Marcuse, saw the latent power in the political implications of art freed from ritual, religion, and the commodity form, and in a word: ideologies (concretized or abstract).

Performance art is recollection without reification and in being so, it is a politicized epistemology. A political epistemology results from performance art being a remembrance of things past without the need to anchor that remembrance in concrete non-transient representations. Performance becomes political because its method and subject matter are precisely the question of what status representations hold. And in being about representations while refusing to be yet another representation in the same tradition, performance art strikes at the core of representational activity.

But in questioning the nature of the representational process performance art is at once addressing the history of art and exceeding its boundaries. Performance art exceeds the boundaries of art and its history by refusing to look like art, to behave like art, to be sold like art, or in fact to have an audience like art. In extreme situations it refuses even to 'make' art, and prefers rather, 'doing' art, or just plain 'doing'.

Perhaps the easiest way to show the status of performance as politicized art is to examine a piece which was performed in 1981 in response to which questions as to the political and social appropriateness of the piece arose. Access to the political nature of performance is possible in the first place through the surface qualities of a work which did not construe itself as overtly political but which nonetheless elicited a cry of 'racism' from a number of critics. This piece was construed by some viewers not as politicized art, but rather, as just bad politics (taste?). This piece could be considered a failure, insofar as it fails to elicit the intended response, or, it might, on the strength of this failure, be considered a success precisely because the presentation of its intention attained a good degree of transience.

The piece is entitled "Route 1 & 9 (the Last Act)" and was performed by The Wooster Group at The Performance Garage in NYC. The questionable element of this performance piece is a sequence in which the performers appear in blackface and make live telephone calls to local fried chicken outlets mimicking a Black dialect. Whoever happens to be contacted at these outlets becomes an unwitting participant in the piece: the voice is monitored and amplified live to the audience. A director of the New York State Council of the Arts cites this sequence in the performance as one of the reasons why the Council considers the piece 'inappropriate' and thereby justifies itself in slashing the funds for The Wooster Group by terming this sequence a " ... harsh and caricatured portrayal of a racial minority"¹²

Tony Whitfield, commenting on "Route 1 & 9" for *Fuse Magazine*, begins his assessment of the performance: "Between the objective 'coinage' of a society and the representation of a politics formed by its lived experience lies interpretation"¹³. This statement exhibits a subtle misunderstanding of where the import of performance art lies. (I would like to here avoid any discussion of the responsibility of the artist in interpretation, or indeed

any discussion of responsibility in art.) Performance artists are not concerned with the evaluation of 'culturally identifiable imagery', but instead concern themselves with the performance of images and the activity of imaging and presenting images, and further, this activity transcends whatever particular images one chooses to portray. In fact, the director of The Wooster Group (Elizabeth Le Compte) claims that she does not consciously select which images to portray.

Whitfield can call this particular performance dangerous and aggressive only because he concentrates his vision on the particular images and thereby fails to see that the center of performance art's activity involves not the performance of images but performance which evokes the activity of imaging.

For performance art to have its center in performance and not in the particular qualities or suggestions of particular images is possible only in an age in which images are so rampant, so easily suggested, and so potentially ubiquitous. It is only because we have buried ourselves under a heap of images which are divorced from any one or another ritual activity that we can now look and inquire as to what the activity of making images says about us; that is, what we are about when we make images.

NOTES

1. "What is Performance Art?" in *Performance Art 1*, Premiere Issue, (1979) p. 23.
2. *Performance Anthology SourceBook for a Decade of California Performance Art*, eds. Carl E. Loeffler & Darlene Tong, (1980) p. ix.
3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1050a23-1050b.
4. C Lasch requoted in "The Social Performer" by Bruce Barber from *Life* magazine (formerly *Performance Art*) 1980, pp 12-13.
5. "The Social Performer" Ibid p. 11.
6. *Ways Of Seeing* Penguin & BBC, 1972.
7. Walter Benjamin, "*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*," from *Illuminations*, Harcourt (1968) p. 221.
8. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett, (1978) pp. 57-70.
9. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Beacon, (1378) p. 73.
10. Benjamin, op. cit, p. 241.
11. Ibid, pp. 241-2.
12. Requoted in *Fuse Magazine*, February/March 1982, p. 297.
13. Tony Whitfield, "Route 1 & 9". *Fuse Magazine*, op cit, p. 296.