

### 3 The Body as a Medium: Switzerland's Performance Network

It is meanwhile perfectly natural to team up the word "performance" with sports, banks, cars, high-energy soft drinks and the stock market. The inflationary use of the term is unquestionably a function of a society that is out for ever greater productivity and growth in every sector.

The entertainment and events sector uses performativity as a communicative factor: DJ, disco and pop culture all incorporate performative elements, and even classical live-art (dance, music, theatre) brings us "performances". These few examples are enough to demonstrate that, when it comes to the term "performance", confusion reigns. How problematic the definition of "performance art" is, and how very differently it can be applied, continues to be substantiated by the difficulties encountered by applicants for and recipients of funds from grant-making bodies, which usually have no specific division devoted to performance art. What is it that you do? Do you dance? Make theatre? Recite texts? Make music? What exactly is performance art in the context of the visual arts.

The essential starting point of performance art is the body – as a home to the soul, a means of conveying and expressing identity, and a personal or social construct. This direct confrontation with the essential nature of the human being has evolved over the last forty years in accordance with the social trends and influences of the day. It has always been inherent to performance art to break taboos and challenge established norms.

#### *Performance art as social sculpture*

The present-day understanding of performance art goes back to the early work of the Futurists, Dadaists and Situationists. The appearances of the internationally ramified, interdisciplinary Fluxus group in the Fifties had an enduring effect on the political actions and happenings that took place in the United States and Europe in the Sixties and Seventies. The student revolts of 1968, the Woodstock Festival, the drug-pervaded hippie movement, the attempt to establish new forms of living as an alternative to the bourgeois ideal of

the nuclear family – all these supported the climate of rebellion. Social criticism and protest against the ills of society led the German artist Joseph Beuys to develop the idea of social sculpture, while others (for instance, the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch) deconstructed religious icons and explored the physical frontiers (of pain). Feminist strategies inspired women artists to performative rebellion against classic gender roles. For example, in 1968 Valie Export put her male partner, who was down on all fours, on a lead and took him for a walk through the streets of Vienna; in 1973, Gina Pane stuck rose thorns into her arms and slit her skin with razor blades in symbolic protest against the injuries inflicted on women by society and the treatment of women as objects.

Public space was increasingly co-opted for politically motivated art actions. The small, almost conspiratorial groups that had formerly attended art events of this kind in private homes, studios and galleries now widened to include chance passers-by who involuntarily witnessed these performances. One of the strengths of this art form is that it reaches audiences situated outside the artistic context, confronting them with unexpected ideas and images “in the midst of daily life”. As a case in point: in 1969 Dieter Meier, now an internationally acclaimed film-maker and musician (Yello), spent five days in front of the Kunsthaus in Zurich filling 1000 pieces of metal into sacks for eight hours a day.

By the 1970s, Urs Lüthi, Switzerland's representative at the 2001 Venice Biennale, was already studying the expressive possibilities of gender, creating guises combining masculine and feminine connotations in his performances and photographs. Manon was cultivating a performative identity through her inimitable appearance and, in 1977, questioning her own “image” with a photograph showing her in sunglasses and the same outfit seventeen times and without glasses once. Gerhard Johann Lischka, a lecturer in performance and media art today, was massaging people in public. And Roman Signer, Switzerland's representative at the 1999 Biennale in Venice and known nowadays for his explosion art, was just embarking on his career.

The 1980s brought Switzerland a new spirit of adventure: “A direct view of the Mediterranean, down with the Alps” – that was the rallying cry for a host of young people protesting

bourgeois values and an elitist concept of art. All over Switzerland, but above all in Zurich, enormous, angry creative power and potential were unleashed. Everyone, so it seemed, was making music, performance, art in every form. In the *Saus und Braus* exhibition at Zurich's Strauhof, this explosion of artistic and visionary energy was conveyed with long-term effect.

The Form+Farbe (F+F) art school in Zurich became the catalyst for this new mood of optimism. Many visual artists found in the language of performance a means of communicating their interests and views to the public and reacting quickly, directly and radically to events.

In wild appearances with changing ensemble, the performance group Bataks addressed the subjects of art and medicine. Walter Pfeiffer, today an internationally acknowledged photo and video artist, illustrated (his) narcissism, and Christian Philippe Müller, meanwhile an internationally acclaimed conceptual artist, guided sightseeing tours of unattractive places in the city, far off from the conventional tourist landmarks.

A host of Swiss artists also joined international performance groups like Minus Delta T and Black Market. Both of them formulated artistic and political manifestos, and the members of both groups performed solo and in varying combinations. But their thematic and formal approaches were very different. While Minus Delta T took their durably media-oriented, political concepts round the world and were invited to make a stop at the *dokumenta* in Kassel in 1986, Black Market – which numbered Norbert Klassen, Boris Nieslony and Vänçi Stirnemann among its members – celebrated the “poetic use” of everyday objects and materials.

Apart from public provocation by way of what appear, at first glance, to be meaningless actions, the idea of the relativity of space and time is central to the concept of a performance. The presence of the artist is one of the prime attributes of performance art. The artist's presence guarantees the presence of the work, i.e. its very existence: if the artist goes, the work disappears, with a few relics perhaps remaining. All that is left of the work are the memories and narrative accounts of the people who witnessed it.







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*Authenticity versus repetition*

Time-based art declares any given space an art space for a defined period of time. The time factor makes the performance into a unique experience for both artist(s) and audience. Body and space become interdependent. A performance is never rehearsed; preparation consists in outlining the general sequence of events and determining the materials to be used. The performance itself is the realisation of this pre-devised concept. But the performers are not actors playing a role. During the defined period they are “themselves” and show a facet of their personality. This authenticity intensifies the physical and spatial experience of time and identity.

In the early days of performance art, there was a fundamentalist conviction that a performance could never be repeated. The uniqueness of the chosen space and time was considered untranslatable to a different temporal and spatial context. Photographs, films and video recordings had purely documentary character, and were not viewed as new and independent works. Meanwhile these captured moments of art without a work are being offered on the art market. Per-

9 Yan Duyvendak, Geneva/Barcelona: “Dreams Come True”, La Bâtie Festival, Geneva 2003, co-production between the Art Fund (Kunstkredit) of Basel-Stadt and the Centre for the Contemporary Image, Saint-Gervais, Geneva. (Photo: Cyrill Jucker)

10 Erik Dettwiler, Zurich: “Toast, 3 min 20 sec.”, silent video work, b/w, video still. (Photo: Erik Dettwiler, Zurich)

performances are frequently recreated for these images, to ensure that the lighting and sound are ideal. These new and independent artworks enable artists to improve their financial situation: now they have something to sell.

And yet performance art continues to rely heavily on the eye-witness factor and the emotional memories of moments experienced. The authenticity of a live performance, the electric atmosphere of the created space, cannot be reproduced completely in a photograph or on video.

### *Networks*

International connections fostered the worldwide networks without which the development, communication and firm establishment of performance art would be unthinkable today. The marginalisation of performance art within the arts at large prompted many performance artists to organise festivals and conferences designed to provide their art with its own platform. Switzerland saw the establishment of the Performanceindex in Basel, the Belluard Festival in Fribourg, STOP.PT in Berne, Pow-Wow and Ink Art & Text in Zurich, the Perforum at the Seedamm Culture Centre in Pfäffikon and the Apropos+Bureau de Performance based around Ruedi Schill and Monika Günther in Lucerne.

One of the first performance festivals took place in Zurich in 1987. Entitled *remembering – identity – forgetting*, it explored the influence of various materials on the human body and human identity: Vänçi Stirnemann tested the interaction of food and the human voice on sound recording equipment; Chrig Perrin exposed her body to a photocopier; while Fritz Franz Vogel demonstrated mortality, the disappearance of the body, by leaving wet traces of his body on a wooden floor, which gradually faded away as they dried.

Gerhard Johann Lischka's performance class at the F+F school in Zurich and Norbert Klassen's class at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Berne contributed substantially to the strong Swiss scene that established itself in the Nineties and is among the most influential in the international arena today. The constant give and take between the many different schools that emerged within the performance movement prepared the ground for a broad spectrum of performative work centred in German-speaking Switzerland.

*Divergent tendencies in present-day performance art*

Certain approaches are rooted in the theatre, as exemplified by Norbert Klassen and Yan Duyvendak; others, as Roman Signer demonstrates, have developed from conceptual art. And then there is so-called "body performance art", which frequently revolves around pain and suffering, recalling archaic and religious rituals. The performers are like shamans who, thanks to their energies, possess the ability to cast a spell on the spectators. Endurance, testing the limits of mental and physical pain, is a feature of the performances of the JOKO duo, for example. Muda Mathis, on the other hand, uses her strong physical presence and provocative body play to question traditional female roles.

Another trajectory is process-oriented performance, which often involves the audience and evinces a strong social component. One of the most interesting representatives of this method is San Keller, who has been seeking contact with people and involving them in his projects since the mid-Nineties. What he actually does is offer them services. Basing his approach on the progressive isolation and general insecurity that have emerged in post-postmodern society, he concentrates on the social "gaps" that have materialised. Keller goes out from the idea that, in unaccustomed situations, people exhibit unexpected behaviour and that enables them to gain fresh access to themselves and others. The artwork is the shared action, the time spent together.

Whereas the Seventies and Eighties were shaped by global social tensions and feminist conflicts, the Nineties demanded a new discourse and differentiated attitudes to the social definition of and approach to the body: the achievements of the sexual revolution and the omnipotence of medical science were massively called into question by the appearance of AIDS. Gender theories developed new approaches to the polarity between the biological and social definitions of the sexes. Fierce debates and questioning of national and ethnic identities incited a new way of thinking about one's own body, its physical appearance and its forms of expression. Advances in biotechnology and genetic engineering have radically changed the ethical questions posed about life/body/identity.

With the development of video and the Internet into popular mass media, the immediacy of the experienced mo-



ment is no longer the opposite of virtual, reproduced experiences. The new media have led to a change in the reception and use of the body in art. Erik Dettwiler, for instance, explores the relationship between body and space in his video performances by choreographing a performance without live audience, specifically for video. Through subsequent manipulation of sound and image, he can render a work more precise and put on the same work again and again, wherever he likes.

The Internet is frequently used to proliferate the staging of interactive moments. In his performance *in bed with me* (2000), Marc Mouci, one of the youngest representatives of Swiss performance art, moves on two levels: on the one hand, he produces a one-to-one situation in intimate surroundings, which he creates in a public space, a gallery; on the other, he documents this situation on the Internet. Having put up a bed in a gallery and invited spectators to spend a night there with him, he subsequently publishes a photo of his bedmate on the Web, along with an account of that person's experiences, as supplied by the guest's answers to a catalogue of questions. With this work, Mouci cleverly links the dichotomy of intimacy and uncontrollable public exposure.

In the Nineties, a string of artist duos – featuring a striking number of women – formed around the two schools mentioned above. The polarity of a duo enables the complexity of life to be explored by way of the give and take between two people. The JOKO duo, who have already been mentioned, addressed the subject of pain and endurance in their connected series. Victorine Müller and Irene Bachman examined the body as a surface. In *Fusione* (1997) they applied silicon cream to their naked bodies, moved towards each other, embraced and then stuck together, forming a “Siamese body”. They then pulled and tore themselves “free” of this shared skin, ending up separate again, their artificial skin hanging down in shreds. In the performances of Brigitte Bérard and Mileva Josipovic (1995–97), the artists played reality and staging off against each other and posed the question of genuine versus play-acted identity.

Jörg Köppl/Peter Začek employed their bodies as vehicles, probing physical spaces and examining the possible object character of the body. The materials they used for their performances were usually very simple: in *Gefährt*



**11** Les Reines Prochaines: "The Show Must Go On", postcard of the presidents to accompany the record release, 2002. (Photo: Tobias Madörin)

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(Vehicle, 1998) they taped their bodies together so they became a chair "with which" they moved (more specifically: rolled) across a bridge. Franz Gratwohl and his performance partners (Stefan Halter, BBB Johannes Deimling) created situations in which communication in our own cultural context was explored.

Performance art probably changes more quickly than any other art form. As the examples show, it can employ a very wide variety of different expressive means. Even the concept of the "performer" is constantly changing. Victorine Müller redefines it through a series of performances which she initiates but does not actively participate in: she instructs people to translate their stories and images into performative form (e.g. *supp.spiro*, 1999, *étuis de rêves*, 2000, *can't stop*, 2003). She thereby takes herself out of the projection field as an artist, i.e. a person whose inimitability was once the key characteristic of performance art.

Both the once-strict definition of performance and the performer's own self-image have transformed over the years. Certain artists exclusively employ performative techniques. Others are ready to call on additional forms of artistic ex-



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**12** "Losing Face", Gratwohl/BBB Deimling, Zurich/Berlin. Physical Vehicle, ICA performance festival, London, 2001. (Photo: Robert Ayers)

pression, such as photography, video and drawing (as typified by Chantal Michel, Franz Gratwohl, Mourad Cherait, Ana Axpe or Katja Schenker) and installations (as used by Muda Mathis and Köppl/Záček).

Performative offerings have become an indispensable fixture at international museums, galleries and art fairs. Performance conferences and festivals are held throughout the world at regular intervals, but Switzerland remains a major centre. A further focus of performance art has emerged around the Basel art academy. The Kaskadenkondensator, also located in Basel, has established a laboratory for the performative arts. And many Swiss performance artists who began developing their work in the Eighties and Nineties are now giving workshops and teaching at international art schools.

#### *Studying performance art*

Meanwhile efforts are under way to chart and archive the history of performance art. In 1999 the Schwarze Lade of ASA-European was turned over to the Perforum at the culture centre in Pfäffikon. Founded by Boris Nieslony, the Schwarze Lade is one of the few performance art archives in

Europe that has continuously collected notes, outlines, memorabilia and publications relating to performance art, live art and related currents since the Eighties.

In 2002 the co-founders of the Performanceindex in Basel – Heinrich Lüber, a performance artist who focuses on “architectonic languages”, and Linda Cassens, an art historian – launched a long-term project entitled *Das Performative als Herausforderung für die Wissenschaft* (Performativity as a Challenge to Scholarship). It calls upon an international network of performance artists, theoreticians, ethnologists, theatre scholars, philosophers, architects and curators to analyse performative strategies under the aspect of “space as progress”, in connection with spatial organisation (museum, public/social, lived, architectonic space, etc.), action elements and definitions of time. The performative influence on other artistic areas is also being examined, with connections and associations revealing themselves above all in photography (e.g. Ugo Rondinone), video art (e.g. Franticek Klossner) and music (e.g. Les Reines Prochaines). This large-scale project is an attempt to position performativity as a spatial concept in regard to its history and interdisciplinary interfaces. The research process is intended as a contribution to concrete curatorial and artistic projects.

The broader debate surrounding the performative has led to more widespread acceptance and more intense interest in performance art. Performance art festivals have long ceased to be for insiders only. These days they attract large numbers of visitors and engage significant media attention. There is no doubt that this also derives from the fact that performances are always social events as well: there is no “work” driving a wedge between artist and audience.

It remains an interesting phenomenon that Switzerland should have proven such fertile ground for this art form. And as the new trends in performance art confirm, there is no danger of this tradition and wealth of artistic experience falling into oblivion. The future is sure to build on them.

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