

Zwischenzonen

Über die Repräsentation
des Performativen und die
Notation von Bewegung

Between Zones

On the Representation
of the Performative and
the Notation of Movement

Edited by
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*Horcruxes of Art or the Curse of
the Performative—On Rituals, Rites
and Relics in Contemporary Art*

Raphael Gygax

In her post modernist assemblage centered on apprentice wizard Harry Potter, J. K. Rowling astonishes her reader time and again with fascinating symbolic snippets garnered from all manner of contexts. The so-called horcruxes she describes—everyday objects such as mirrors, rings or goblets, on which a black magic curse has been placed, through which they take on a life and even a soul of their own—can be read as a transformation of the religious cult of the relic.¹ This animist aspect is evident: touching the object not only gives access to the emotional world of the individual who created it, but also reveals its capacity as a vessel of memory with future continuity. In its self-reflexiveness, the horcrux is a “living relic” that represents the Gordian knot in not only the discourse on the representation of performance and the performative, but also in that on its (fictitious) destruction.

Since the early days of Performance Studies, which have been gaining ground noticeably since the 1970s boom in performance art, a gap has opened up between the two sides of the debate about the essence of performance.² One position is based on the assumption that the moment of the actual performance is key. This, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, is a core trait of the performative turn, and places the emphasis on the performance as unique and unrepeatable. Performance theoretician Peggy Phelan underscores this view when she states that “performance’s only life is in the present” and argues against any recording, reproduction or repeat of the performance.³ For Phelan, it is the uniqueness and transience of the performance, bordering on the present, that is at the heart of the matter.⁴ At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who take a stance

1 See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Bloomsbury, London 2005.

2 Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick distinguish between the concept of “performance” relating to Performance Art and theater practices, which have the moment of performance itself at their core, and the concept of “performativity”, which can be traced back to the speech act theories of J. L. Austin. In his canonic text, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin described as “performative” such illocutionary speech acts as “I do” (in a marriage ceremony) or “I name this ship...” What characterizes these performative statements is the fact that the issuing of the utterance is in itself the performing of the action. Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick define performativity in the same vein as an “introversion of the signifier.” See Andrew Parker, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction,” *Performativity and Performance*, Routledge New York 1995.

3 In full: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.” Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked—The Politics of Performance*, Routledge New York 1993, p. 146.

4 Phelan argues against “representational visibility,” which can only be prevented if the singular performance remains a one-off and is not subject to the economy of reproduction and, with that, representation. Phelan writes: “To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.” According to this definition, however, the performance becomes “an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward.” Phelan, 1993 (see note 3), p. 146 ff.

against Phelan, by arguing for the inclusion of potential recording forms—including not only technologically reproducible media such as photography and film but also the installations addressed in this text—that they regard as part and parcel of the ontological essence of performances and performative events.⁵ Philip Auslander has always emphasized the aspect of reproducibility in his performance theories. In his study entitled *Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture*, he explores the phenomenon that performances today are increasingly underpinned by reproducible media, and have become a multi-media enterprise no longer defined primarily by the moment or their own uniqueness.⁶ In his text *The Performativity of Performance Art* Auslander also addresses the extent to which the documentary material relating to performances can take on its own performative character and, in so doing, question the (apparent) characteristics of performance, such as authenticity or the presence of an audience during the performance.⁷

This, then, is the context in which this essay—as a kind of theoretical experiment—is embedded. The discussion centers on the installative and sculptural aspects of the performance venue, which function as installations in their own right, and are described here as places of ritual. The objects used in the performances will also be examined more closely in terms of their performative potential, and how they might function as places of memory. Within this framework, the performance is considered in terms of the tradition of ritual.⁸ In recent years, as a result of retrospective surveys of the work of prominent performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s, and more recent works of performance art in galleries and museums, questions have arisen regarding the representation of the works, and these questions have

5 Erika Fischer-Lichte traces the development of theater and performance art since the 1960s, focusing in particular on the changing relationship between actor and audience, and on the concepts of “event” and “performance.” See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetic*, Saskya Iris Jain (trans.), Routledge New York 2008. [First published in German as *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt 2004.]

6 In his study, Auslander compellingly outlines how live events and their media reproduction have always had a reciprocal effect on one another, thereby creating both the illusion of contemporaneity and that of disappearance. Whereas Phelan emphasizes the authenticity of performances and defines this as their main characteristic, Auslander is interested primarily in the interactive aspect. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture*, Routledge New York 1999.

7 It should be noted that Auslander concentrates on material from technically reproducible media. His research in this field is ongoing (see his essay in the present anthology). He first posited his thesis in Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Art,” *Performing Arts Journal* (84), September 2006, pp. 1–10.

8 Amidst this diversity, a distinction should be made between “performance” as a form of artistic expression, and “performativity” which draws on the two separate traditions of ritual theory and speech act theory. In this essay, the focus is on the former.

elicited responses based on a variety of performance strategies.⁹ The question of the performative quality of performance documentation, or "left-over material" that is not based on technologically reproducible media, has taken on a renewed topicality in recent times.¹⁰ What is more, the documentation of performance has taken on a new significance as an art market commodity. However, to describe this phenomenon as a purely commercial strategy in terms of marketability would be rather short-sighted.

PERFORMANCE AS RITUAL—THE STAGE AS A PLACE OF RITUAL

When British artist Spartacus Chetwynd had the walls painted brown and the room dimly lit for her solo exhibition, the White Cube was staged in reference to the notion of a classical museum of anthropology (fig. 1, p. 16).¹¹ Chetwynd presented a motley array of masks, costumes and objects she had used in previous performances, with no clear scientific typology or any explanatory wall texts. Her fascinating take on a pseudo-anthropological space thus provided a showcase for the "relics" and was, at the same time, an unequivocal indication of the ritual character of her performances. This form of presentation clearly reminds us of the often close relationship between performance and ritual. Reading performances through the prism of ritual, seeing the venues in which they occur as places of ritual and the objects they involve as ritual objects, can be a useful way of helping to explain today's forms of representation within the institutional framework of the museum.

Ethnologist Milton Singer (1912–1994), theater anthropologist Richard Schechner, and cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) are among those who have made important contributions to researching ritual culture, and have linked anthropology with theater. Victor Turner drew a connection between his concepts of "social drama" or "liminality" (also described as a threshold state) and the

9 For her forthcoming retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (14 March to 31 May 2010) Marina Abramović is having actors reconstruct individual performances, alongside left-over material. A somewhat different approach was taken by Gianni Motta, who had a pilgrimage route built into the museum in the form of a 600m long wooden corridor, where museum guards recounted his actions as oral history (24 January to 21 March 2004, migros museum für gegenwartskunst). See Heike Munder (ed.), *Gianni Motti* (exhibition catalogue, migros museum für gegenwartskunst), JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2006.

10 For example the group exhibition *Not to Play with Dead Things* (2008) at the Villa Arson, or *Performative Attitudes* (2010) at the Kunsthaus Glarus.

11 The exhibition ran from 24 April to 22 May 2007 at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst. See *Spartacus Chetwynd* (exhibition catalogue, migros museum für gegenwartskunst), Raphael Gyax (ed.), JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2007.

concept of "communitas," thereby shedding important light on the relationship between performance and ritual. Reading performance as ritual would define it as "formalized action" or "action involving transcendent values."¹² At the time, Turner was widely criticized for his innovative attempts to incorporate the disordered and the dynamic. In his theories of ritual, he built on the approach developed by Arnold van Gennep, who defined rites of passage as comprising three phases: separation, transition, re-incorporation. Using this definition, even entering a house can become a rite, in which the threshold marks the moment of transition between inside and outside. Turner took that concept of the threshold or transitional phase one step beyond its original meaning as a halfway point in a rite of passage, by applying it to times of political and historical change.¹³ Performance, in the context of the art world, can often be described as an anti-structural act that can momentarily suspend the structure of hierarchically organized relationships (including the audience). The artist, as the performer, can sometimes merge with the audience to form part of the "communitas" (whose traits are equality, solidarity and spontaneity, albeit demoted to the position of outsiders as part of the anti-structure), while the "societas" (the institutionalized and standardizing structure) forms a counterpoint.

Absolute Körperkontrolle (2006) by Italian-British artist Seb Patane could be taken as a reflection on this concept of ritual: two young men in traditional hunting garb, leaning against one another, on a slightly raised round wooden platform. The minimal choreography they perform is based on the moment of contact and rebuttal, on the sense of both their own weakness and the support they provide. In their embrace, they seek to stabilize one another over a period of two hours, repeatedly interrupted by intervals in which the constellation falls apart.¹⁴ In the exhibition setting, the performance was relayed to a monitor on the floor. The footage was filmed in advance. The situation is marked by a subtle homoeroticism combined with the hard bass beat of electronic music at occasional intervals. The stage setting heightens the audience's perception of the two men as a single unit, or as a sublimation of the same: a "communitas." The stage itself becomes a place of ritual. Nearby, there is a two-meter high canvas, on which a photograph of a mountain expedition is printed—probably

12 In other words, these are acts that can be repeated. See Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals. A Critical Approach*, Routledge, London 2003, p. 3.

13 See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Publ., New York 1969. See also Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Editions Picard, Paris 1981 (first published 1909).

14 The two-hour performance took place at the opening of the exhibition *While Interwoven Echoes Drip into a Hybrid Body* on 20 January 2006.

the ascent of K2. According to the artist the photograph comes from the Ordo Templi Orientis, an esoteric community, similar to freemasonry, that was founded in 1900 with the aim of achieving human perfection through ritual magic. In this example too, the stage takes on the classic function of marking the moment of transition between inside and outside. This same transition can also be found in Banks Violette's sculptural installation *Kill Yourself (Twin)* (2006). The work consists of a floor-mounted metal platform with a flooring of black epoxy resin panels, echoed by another hanging from the ceiling. On the stage, there is a corporeal structure of neon tubes—a visceral form that spills out over the stage and touches the floor. It creates the impression that the pressure on the kinetic sculpture, which is forced to the ground, has been created by the two levels of the stage. The aesthetic adopted here by Violette is one that is nurtured by Minimal Art as well as by the Death and Black Metal subculture, both of which are known for their embrace of the occult and their penchant for ritual. Although there is no sound in Violette's sculpture, it nevertheless plays an important dramaturgical role, albeit only within an imaginary space. The fact that music represents an elementary point of reference for rituals has long been evident, even in the oldest initiation ceremonies (birth, marriage, death). Some anthropologists even surmise that the roots of music may lie in ritual.¹⁵ Above all, strongly rhythmic and repetitive sounds, as in electronic music, for instance, are eminently suitable as a contemporary accompaniment or even as an introduction to rituals.

With their sculpture *No Way Back* (2006), Delia Gonzalez and Gavin Russom link the idea of modernist architecture to a repetitive electro-sound that conjures up a sense of some archaic world. It consists of more than a dozen modules of varying sizes, covered in a glossy black or marbled laminate coating, with a compositional similarity to different architectural topoi. Some of them are fitted with self-built synthesizers. The stringent rhythm of the sound is mirrored in the architectural elements. The simple forms and surface finishes of the individual components recall the pillars and columns of ancient Greek temple architecture—not only in the altar-like context, but also in the variations of modernist and fascist architecture. In rituals, music tends to take on the function of synchronizing the participants, marking time, and underpinning certain events. This choreographic ritual function is also addressed by Gonzalez and Russom, even though there are no actual participants. In the sculptures of Gonzalez and

15 For further information, see Golo Föllmer, "Zum Verhältnis von Musik, Ritual und Medien," Kathrin Fallenbach et al. (ed.), *Medienrituale—Rituelle Performanz in Film, Fernsehen und Neuen Medien*, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2008, pp. 257–265.

Russom, modernism, music and spirituality meet. Even in modernism, this interactive aspect was noted by several artists. For instance, *Le Sacré du Printemps* (1913) by the Ballets Russes might be regarded as the first prototypical *gesamtkunstwerk* in which these (seemingly) contradictory elements come together.¹⁶ The interaction between modernism and spiritualism is also explored time and again in the works of Mai-Thu Perret—often embedded in her fictional epic *The Crystal Frontier*, about an autonomous women's commune in the desert of New Mexico. She conceived her work *Winter of Discontent or the Ballad of a Russian Doll* (2003) as a stage sculpture—albeit under the premise that a series of related performances should take place there, forming a cycle of songs about the different phases in the life of a girl in the commune. The stage itself seems to form a hybrid linking two different subtypes from the same period of the 1920s. With its row of light bulbs set at regular intervals, the stage not only references the cabaret shows of that era, but also pop culture, while the aluminum backdrops are more redolent of constructivism. The envisaged cabaret evening, however, was never actually completed because the co-composer—artist Steven Parrino (1958–2005)—was killed in an accident two years later. The stage then became a memorial.¹⁷

With their installation *Junkie* (2006), Rita Ackermann and Agathe Snow describe not a classic stage setting, but one that focuses on the stylized use of strong red light, electronic music and pungent odors. In the first of two openly interconnected rooms, both painted black, there are three Plexiglas rings of different sizes suspended from the black ceiling by black-painted chains, forming a chandelier-like table. On the table, there are more than a dozen see-through resin sculptures of hands forming a supplicating gesture, some of them tied to a spit by a leather belt. The room is filled with the acrid stench of ammonia rising from a pool of (fake) blood, as well as the intense smell of food that was used in a performance on the opening evening. The artists had covered the tables with all manner of foods such as octopus, desserts and offal in a combination as fascinating as it was repulsive: a ceremonial offering of food that evoked the impression of an ancient

16 *Le Sacré du Printemps* by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes can be regarded as the defining moment of nascent modernism—a full two years before Kasimir Malevich painted his *Black Square* (1915). The ballet broke with convention and tradition at every level—in the composition by Igor Stravinsky, the choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky and in the costumes and stage design by Nicholas Roerich. In terms of subject matter, too, it was revolutionary in that it addressed a theme—the portrayal of a sacrificial rite—that had never before been seen in classical ballet.

17 During the exhibition *While Bodies Get Mirrored—An Exhibition about Movement, Formalism and Space* the artist completed the performance, and showed it for the first time on 8 April 2010.

sacrificial rite. In the second room, with its strong red hues highlighted by red spotlights, Rita Ackermann's film *Jump on Me* is projected onto three walls. In this unfocused, deep-red tinted setting, two bodies collide in seemingly endless dance-like movements—both clad in androgynous bodysuits. One keeps trying to jump on the other so that their bodies converge, while the other keeps rebutting the gestures. The music by Michael Portnoy and vocals by Rita Ackermann extend the dance sequence into a captivating ritual of desire and rejection—in which the lyrics *You never stop, you never stop to push me down* are repeated like a mantra. Traces of a similar choreography have also been left directly on the projection areas themselves. On the evening before the opening of the show, with no members of the public present, the artist, who is best known for her painting, danced in the room with paint smeared on her body. She imitated choreographic elements of the film and, as she did so, left black traces on the walls and floor. The entire process is reminiscent of an emancipated form of Yves Klein's *Anthropometries*, and also of a ritual dance of invocation. For the viewer, the overall impression is one of a highly charged, multi-sensory atmospheric situation that encompasses moments of dependency, power, trust and abuse. In this respect, this complex installation could be described as a media ritual. However, it is not just about the media portrayal of a ritual practice; it is the combination of media that actually determines the practice and opens a window on a central facet of society. As media theoretician Nick Couldry puts it in his study *Media Rituals*: "Through media rituals, we act out, indeed naturalize, the myth of the media's social centrality."¹⁸

IMMORTAL REMAINS OF RITUAL— PERFORMATIVE RELICS

If performance can be described as ritual and its venues as places of ritual, the remains may be described as relics. The discourse on the performative nature of documentary material discussed at the beginning of this essay would not only define these remains as historical documents, but would attribute to them another additional element—that of performativity. The relic (from the Latin *relinquere*: to abandon, or give up) is still venerated in Catholicism as well as in Buddhism. It may take the form of actual body parts or belongings of a holy person, or objects that have been touched by them. It is the latter, the secondary relics, that bear comparison with the remains of a performance, which have often been in contact with the artist and

¹⁸ Couldry, 2003 (see note 12), p. 2.

have thus undergone a transformation. In their newly elevated role as historical documents, they have (apparently) lost their profane status as mere objects.¹⁹

Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent often uses simple objects for his sculptural installations. He finds these items on the street or buys them in secondhand shops. He then arranges the objects, sometimes unchanged, sometimes with minimal alterations, in new constellations to create sculptures or installations for specific spaces. This re-contextualization (the works generally consist of two different objects) requires very little (physical) input from the artist. The classic model of *inventio*—the art historical topos of creative "invention"—is thus shifted to become an *inventio* in the sense of a creative "discovery" of new contexts. Although this approach can be said to fall within the tradition of the readymade, its multiple components reference an intra-diegetic narrative that enters into a dialectical relationship with the viewer. The titles of the works themselves often have a value in their own right, characterized by a certain lyricism. For his work *Desire* (2009), Soto Climent used spectacle cases, which he folded to look like lascivious tongues protruding from orifices. Another example is the eroticism of his work *A Nap in the Open House* (2009), in which two red high-heeled shoes are placed almost casually on a white sheepskin, yet in fact positioned so precisely that they appear to suggest a vulva. In the past two years, Soto Climent has been using old Venetian blinds to create large-scale installations, mounting them on the wall or suspending them from the ceiling in various arrangements, so that their shimmering appearance gives them a semblance of movement and, with that, a strangely paradoxical equilibrium. The aspect of movement is the prime factor here—a gentle tilt of the slats can be read as an innate historicity. This wild choreography of suspended Venetian blinds is reminiscent of a kind of three-dimensional *écriture automatique*, by which Soto Climent can relate to the surrealist tradition of thought and the surrealist object. Indeed, his works can be seen as descendants of Meret Oppenheim's iconic objects such as *Ma Gouvernante/My Nurse/Mein Kindermädchen* (1936), in which a pair of white high-heeled shoes were presented, tied together, on a silver platter, or even as a reference to Man Ray's object *Cadeau* (1921): an iron with a line of tacks affixed to its flat underside (fig. 2, p. 28). The Surrealists had already explored the notion of the

¹⁹ This makes the term relic seem all the more appropriate, since it too is inherently performative in character. The term relic is often used in performance theory. However, in this context, it is not useful because a relic is something that has been left behind and found again, as on an archeological site. That in itself not only leaves room for chance, but also seems to lack a performative aspect.

object as a fragment of memory—potentially capable of evoking individual memories rather than socially accepted ones—as a means of triggering and developing their own powers of association.²⁰ For this to happen, however, the artist has to imbue the object with a charge that transmits energy in much the same way as that of a relic that has been touched by the saint. The objects break with their original functional purpose and are meant to astonish us, surprise us, become a transitive moment. André Breton described this in his manifesto as “objectivation de l’activité de rêve, son passage dans la réalité.”²¹

This moment of apotheosis, however, harbors a great potential danger: that the act of the artist might be regarded as a reactivation of animism. Animism, in the field of anthropology, describes certain religious beliefs among indigenous peoples who assume that every object—that is, every object that is not a human entity—has a life of its own (*anima* = soul).²² Although the discourse about the soul may seem an antiquated topic—even Descartes dismissed the notion of the soul as a non-thing with neither space nor volume, as void of dimensions as a point in geometry—the debate continues with remarkable tenacity, especially in New Age philosophies, esoteric thought and popular epics.²³ In the last chapter of his insightful study of cultural history *Das zeremonielle Tier*, exploring ritual culture, Thomas Macho examines the concept of “ensoulment” and the notion that places, things and people can be imbued with a soul.²⁴ The concept of ensoulment could be read as an alternative to animism. As Macho writes: “we perceive it as a difference that does not occur in principle but in the manner of an epiphany, in certain situations. No object or living creature actually possesses a soul, yet it can be endowed with one or become ensouled in a certain situation at a certain moment. The soul has the function of an interim space, an *in-between*, which can render a space perceptible in the first place. This in-between is often highly complex.”²⁵ In other words, ensoulment is based on a dialectical structure which occurs

20 In his essay on the historicity of objects, Peter J. Schneemann examines surrealist objects in the context of performance and relic. See Peter J. Schneemann, “Die Geschichtlichkeit des Objektes—Bildende Kunst als Medium der Erinnerung,” Peter Rusterholz, Rupert Moser (ed.), *Wir sind Erinnerung*, Hauptverlag, Bern 2003, pp. 103–128.

21 André Breton, “Crise de l’objet,” *Cahiers d’Art*, May 1936, unpaginated. Reprinted in André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, Gallimard, Paris 1965, p. 279.

22 In modern psychology, this is considered in terms of projecting human characteristics onto inanimate objects.

23 For example, the writings of J.K. Rowling, or James Cameron’s box-office hit *Avatar* (2010) with its folkloric, reactionary and racist approach to the portrayal of an indigenous people.

24 Thomas Macho, *Das zeremonielle Tier—Rituale, Feste, Zeiten zwischen den Zeiten*, Styria, St. Stefan 2004, pp. 229–242.

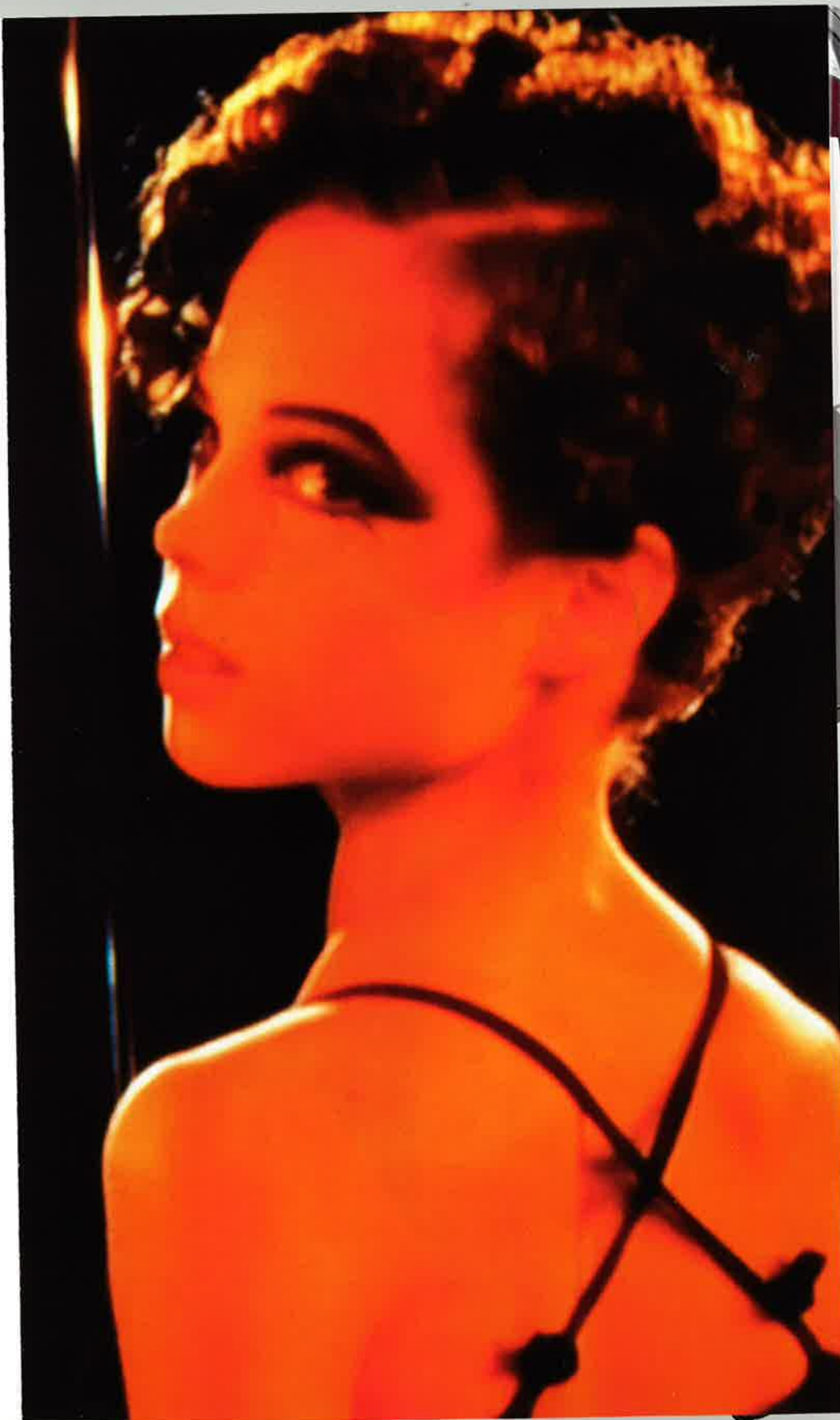
25 Macho, 2004 (see note 24), p. 231.

as a moment of interruption and disruption of routine. The yearning for authenticity and recognition would appear to be one of the most archaic human needs. Yet it is a desire that can never be fully satisfied in this way, as J. K. Rowling, with her horcruxes, would have us hope. The objects will never begin to speak by themselves. The performative will only be able to manifest itself within a dialectical *in-between*. And sometimes a stone is just a stone.

Translation from German: Ishbel Flett

Pictures of an Exhibition

Philip Auslander



← William Forsythe
The Defenders Part 2, 2008

Understanding proves to be an event...

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

I am faced with the peculiar task of writing about two virtual exhibitions. They are virtual only in relation to my position in time and space: one occurred four years ago and is no longer available; the other had not yet opened when I started to write about it. Both were at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, a place I have never visited in a country that is not my own. Even though these exhibitions are recent, my relationship to them is defined by distance, both temporal and spatial, like that of an historian or, better, an archaeologist who seeks to construct a sense of what these events were, what they were about, what it was like to have seen them, by digging into the artifacts they throw off. These artifacts—curatorial and artist's statements, photographs, videos—themselves have various relationships to the exhibitions: whereas some are conceptual and preceded the actual events, others are documentary and record what happened. My own seemingly anomalous relationship to these exhibitions may actually be singularly appropriate, given that both focused on the issue of representing things that are intrinsically ephemeral (sound and music on the one hand, dance and bodily movement on the other) in and through solid, immediately present sculptural installations. It is my task to address these absent events and the artworks in them in the permanent medium of words without having experienced them directly.

I have done something like this before. In 2009, I published online an interpretive analysis of *The Collectors*, Elmgreen & Dragset's contribution to that year's Venice Biennale, based solely on photographic and video documentation.¹ As someone who writes frequently on performance, it is hardly unusual for me to analyze work I have experienced only in this way.² And while my essay on Elmgreen and Dragset may be indistinguishable from my other discussions of performances, it was for me a self-conscious exercise in exploring the implications of a theoretical position concerning performance documentation (including recorded music) I have been developing since 2005 in a series

1 Philip Auslander, "Staging the Exhibition: Elmgreen & Dragset's *The Collectors*," *The Art Section* 3.7, Summer 2009. Available from <http://www.theartsection.com>.

2 Most performance scholars and theater historians discuss performances they have never seen without giving it a second thought. For art historians, whose discipline is based on the premise that it is possible, at least in principle, to see the actual objects they analyze, this procedure can seem problematic (on the latter point, see Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56.4, 1997, pp. 11–18).

of interlocking and overlapping writings, of which the present text is the latest installment.³

One of my chief goals in this work is to challenge the way the discourse on performance documentation typically obsesses over the ostensibly ontological relationship between the event and its documentation, positing the performance as a cause and the document as its effect which becomes, in turn, something from which to retrieve the original event.⁴ Understood in terms of this impossible project, documentation must be judged to be inadequate, for it inevitably provides only a partial and biased record of the event. I have come to see performance documentation differently, however. Whereas the traditional view wants performance documentation to be a medium that passively stores performances to be retrieved later like fossilized insects from amber, I see the document as akin to a performative utterance that brings the event into being as a performance through the act of framing it as such. The performance document is best understood not as a secondary representation of a prior event but as a presentational space—whether that of photography, audio recording, video, or the written word—in which the performance takes place for the beholder. The crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance, but the one between the document and its audience. What is needed, then, is not so much an ontology of the performance document as a phenomenology of the audience's relationship to it, the process by which the event, whether a performance or an exhibition, discloses itself to us through our engagement with its artifacts.

As audience, our imaginative realization of a performance from its documentation is not primarily a process of retrieving information about something that took place in the past, but the activation of a performance in our present, in which we take part. I disagree,

3 The earlier essays are: "The Performativity of Performance Art Documentation," *Performing Arts Journal* 84, 2006, pp. 1–10; "Reactivation: Performance, Mediatization and the Present Moment," Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Janis Jefferies, and Rachel Zerihan (ed.), *Interfaces of Performance*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2009, pp. 81–95; "Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance Art Documentation," Jonas Ekeborg (ed.), *Lessons in the Art of Falling: Norwegian Performance and Process Art 1966–2009*, Preus Museum, Horten, Norway, 1999, pp. 93–95.

4 For a good overview of the discourses and issues surrounding performance documentation, see Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2006. As Reason shows, the debates focus on performance's ephemerality and the question of whether this should be respected as an intrinsic aspect of performance or whether it is more important to preserve performances for the future. For evidence that the debate continues, see Carol Kino, "A Rebel Form Gains Favor. Fights Ensue," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2010, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/arts/design/14performance.html?pagewanted=1>. Accessed 17 March 2010.

therefore, with Philip Alperson's admittedly elegant description of a recording of jazz improvisation as "a record of a (unique) action [...] from which we read off, as it were, the original action."⁵ When I listen to recorded music, I hear the actions that produced it not as having occurred at an originary moment in the past to which I am being referred, but as taking place in the present, my present, and addressing me in the here and now. In other words, I experience the event as *contemporaneous*, regardless of the temporal or physical distance between it and me.

I am using the word "contemporaneous" here not in the sense of "contemporary art" (as in "museum of contemporary art") or even just to denote immediacy, but in the way the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer uses it to describe the aesthetic relationship between a work of art and its perceiver:

'Contemporaneity' [...] means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it. It consists in holding on to the thing in such a way that it becomes "contemporaneous"....⁶

Contemporaneity in this sense is not a characteristic that inheres in certain things; it is, rather, something we bring into being through the relationship we establish with art works, a relationship that does not just happen, but which must be accomplished through a conscious act of engagement. As the phrase "presents itself to us" suggests, Gadamer conceives this relationship as a dialogue. An object or event presents itself to us in such a way as to evoke our response: "Understanding begins [...] when something addresses us" (p. 298).

I see something like the dialogue Gadamer describes in Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová's video installation *Manifesto of Futurist Woman (Let's Conclude)* (2008). It would be easy enough to say that their point of reference, Valerie de Saint-Point's 1912 *Manifesto of Futurist Woman*, is an historical artifact reflective of a certain moment and temperament that no longer speaks to current social and cultural situations. But rather than bracketing it off that way, Chişa and Tkáčová allow themselves to be addressed by it and engage with it by finding in it something that speaks to their practice as artists. The video presents majorettes, pretty young women in quasi-military

5 Philip Alperson, "On Musical Improvisation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43.1, 1984, p. 26.

6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 2nd, revised ed., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (trans.), Continuum, London & New York, 2004, pp. 123–124. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the main text.

dress, making codified semaphore gestures with flags in a precise unison choreography that combines these gestures with marching movements. One can imagine that this combination of female beauty, mechanized movement, and militarism would have appealed to the Futurists, but this work is not an illustration of Saint-Point's manifesto. Rather, it is Chişa and Tkáčová's side of the dialogue with a text that presented itself to them. Instead of representing the text as irretrievably alien to us, they find a way of exploring how it may continue to speak to us without suppressing its alterity.

Discussing performance art recreations in his review of Marina Abramović's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Holland Cotter describes a recent performance of Alan Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* (1959), as "a dud," going on to say:

Maybe it couldn't have been otherwise. The work and the sense of energizing newness it once radiated were, as Kaprow knew, the product of a particular time and culture. The recreated performances in MoMA's show [of Abramović's work] are similarly products of a milieu that once made them transgressive, poetic or simply gave them heat, but is now gone. And, through no fault of the performers, the pieces feel like leftover things: flat, dutiful; artifacts.⁷

It is not my purpose to dispute Cotter's evaluation; had I seen these re-performances of *Eighteen Happenings* or Abramović's works, I might have felt the same way. But I do want to take issue with the assumption underlying Cotter's claim, which is that these performances have no meaning outside of their original cultural and historical contexts.

One problem with this position is that it implies historical discontinuity by suggesting since that time is gone and things are different now, we are no longer in a position to find these performances meaningful in the way they once were, which is the only significant way. I follow Gadamer in suggesting that surely there is a profound connection between then and now: who we are now is largely a product of what happened then, which remains part of our current horizon. For example, our present idea of what performance art *is* is indebted to Kaprow—we would not even be able to think the rubric "performance art" as we understand it, let alone use it critically and historically, without his work. "[W]e are always already affected by history [...] It determines in advance [...] what seems to us worth inquiring about. [T]he other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other" (Gadamer, p. 300).

7 Holland Cotter, "Performance Art Preserved, In the Flesh," *The New York Times*, 12 March 2010.

There is no unbridgeable chasm between past and present, because the past is always contained in the present. We do not need to recreate the cultural milieu of *Eighteen Happenings* in order to experience it as contemporaneous, because that milieu is already embedded in our own. As Gadamer puts it, "our understanding [of work from the past] will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world and, correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world" (p. 290). As I noted, this understanding does not simply happen, but results from an intentional engagement with the work designed to make it happen. The understanding of the work that emerges from this engagement will be *our* understanding of it as a contemporaneous work, not a reiteration of the original audience's understanding. Seen in this way, understanding proves to be a performance-like event that occurs in the present tense of a specific interaction between a beholder and a text (understood very broadly here, of course). It is a process that yields no final result, no historical "truth" in the usual sense, but is perpetually contingent and incomplete: "the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process" (Gadamer 298).

Looking at the documentation video of Seb Patane's performance *Absolute Körperkontrolle* (2006), I watch both the performers and the audience.⁸ And while the spectators' presence and reactions are of historical interest, observing them does not get me any closer to an understanding of the work itself. There are aspects of this piece I have difficulty reading: the Lederhosen uniforms worn by the performers signify little to me, which is probably not the case for the museum audience. I connect to the work physically: I can feel in my own body the slow movement of the two men draped over each other, the ways they support one another while shifting their weight, what it would be like to move this way in front of other people for the almost two-hour duration of the piece.⁹ Discussing his view of hermeneutics, Gadamer speaks of the "tension [...] in the play between the

8 In "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" (see n. 3), I note that the audience is often excluded from documentation: "Whereas sociologists and anthropologists who discuss performance stipulate, like Bauman, that the presence of the audience and the interaction of performers and audience is a crucial part of any performance, the tradition of performance art documentation is based on a different set of assumptions. It is very rare that the audience is documented at anything like the same level of detail as the art action. The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the *artist's work* available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an 'interactional accomplishment' to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions" (6).

9 In *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998), Kathy O'Dell argues that performance documentation mobilizes "an unconscious haptic response" in the beholder (14).

[...] text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" (p. 295). Although Patane's work is far less "distanced" from me than the historical texts to which Gadamer refers, its intended relationship to a particular situation is obscure to me, and this strangeness is in tension with a familiarity that derives not only from my corporeal understanding of the work but also from my connection to traditions of choreography and performance in which both Patane and I participate. I do not have to reconstruct the audience's perception of it to understand it; its meaning for me resides in the play between the aspects I recognize and the ones I don't.

When discussing works of art, Gadamer does not limit the ability of the object to present itself and address us to originals: the same effect takes place when we are viewing reproductions. For Gadamer, a copy of an artwork simply provides us with access to the original. A copy is "self-effacing" in that it "functions as a means [to apprehend the original] and [...] loses its function when it achieves its end" (pp. 133–134).

This formulation implies that reproduction or documentation is transparent, a suggestion that is probably unacceptable from the perspective of contemporary media theory, which generally suggests that media such as photography and video are not self-effacing and do not exhaust themselves in the act of presenting something to us, but actively shape the things they convey: "the media intervene; they provide us with selective versions of the world rather than direct access to it."¹⁰ Applying this perspective to performance, Barbara Borčić observes, "Even though a non-edited real time recording is considered an objective document, the usage of technological apparatus is never neutral. The point of view, the angle of shooting, the lighting, the cadre, the frame and the like already determine the recording and put forward an interpretation of the [...] performance."¹¹ Arguably, reproduction or documentation presents us only with a filtered view, not access to the original.

Even if this is true, it is not especially troublesome from Gadamer's perspective, for, as he points out, in historical research "we accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints" (p. 285). The neutrality of the

10 David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, Polity/Blackwell, Cambridge, UK, 2003, p. 3.

11 Barbara Borčić, "Performance Art and its Relation to Archiving," available from http://wiki.gama-gateway.eu/index.php/Guided_tour:_Performance_Art_and_its_Relation_to_Archiving. Accessed 17 March 2010.

apparatus is not at issue because there is never a neutral standpoint from which to perceive anything. Our perception of any subject is always contingent and always open to revision as different aspects of it are disclosed. As far as the question of whether documentation is always already interpretation goes, Gadamer also accepts this as part of the basic epistemological situation. Far from being exceptional and problematic, both the incompleteness of reproduction, mediation, and documentation, and the inevitability of interpretive bias reflect this situation. As we have also seen, Gadamer argues that the object does not achieve "full presence" merely by appearing as an original. We imbue it with presence by grasping it as contemporaneous, whether we access it as an original or in reproduction.

Babette Mangolte thematizes these issues quite explicitly in her photo installations, particularly in the differing versions of *Touching* (2007–2008), in which she invites viewers to sort through and compare many photographs of performances, photographs she feels are "arguably subjective records, translated through the ideas and aesthetics of the photographer [...] to examine the photo details in close up and to create your own composition and collage."¹² In the version of this installation shown at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, the array of photos was accompanied by videos of the performances and "iconic images" from them, thus presenting the viewer with a range of different representations and presentational modes. Each viewer constructs the performances not by attempting to extract the objective "truth" of these events from the record, but experientially through a visual and tactile dialogue with Mangolte's images that yields knowledge of the performances. The act of understanding the performances is coterminous with the act of sorting and arranging the photographs.

Approaching my task here as an exhibition archaeologist, not an art critic (I seek to understand, not to evaluate) I am in very much the same position as the viewers of Mangolte's installations as I sit before my computer juggling DVDs, photographs, documents, and websites, seeking to grasp the exhibitions and the works in them and bring them into "full presence." I am able to experience performances, works of art, or exhibitions from their respective artifacts, whether or not these are self-effacing. I do not claim, of course, that my experience of these events is identical with the experience of someone who attended them physically, only that I am able to experience them in a way that permits me to enter into dialogue with them, that my experience of them is not intrinsically inferior to the experience of someone

¹² Text from: <http://www.babettémangolte.com/install2007-2.html>. Accessed 10 March 2010.

who "was really there," and that this dialogue does not depend on my first arriving at an objective reconstruction of the events.¹³

In Gadamer's analysis, we do not first understand things, then interpret them: we understand things *by* interpreting them (p. 306). It is not a matter of extracting an objective account of the event from its record, then using this account as a basis for interpretation. Rather, both the making of the record and the beholder's use of it are acts of interpretation through which we can understand the event and hold "on to the thing in such a way that it becomes 'contemporaneous' [...]"

¹³ Amelia Jones argues for the validity of accessing performances from documentation (see n. 2). See also Theodore Gracyk, "Listening to Music: Performances and Recordings," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55.2, Spring 1997. Gracyk argues that recorded music is not aesthetically inferior to live performance.