THOUGHTS ON RE-PERFORMANCE, EXPERIENCE, AND ARCHIVISM

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The term “re-performance” has a catchy refrain, a resonance with an implicit political if not seductive undercurrent, specifically in relation to art politics. To perform on some level is everyone’s dream. Yet to re-perform—what is that? Could it be that re-performance implies a fundamental need for artists to sustain the importance of their work as “live art” through some form of documentation? Hypothetically, this should include performances of some merit—whether by Joseph Beuys, Joan Jonas, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Nam June Paik, Alison Knowles, Ann Hamilton, or Carolee Schneemann—that are reproduced synthetically ad infinitum over a period time in places other than from where they originated. It is a virtual idea to place performance art in an institution—a modern art museum, for example—where various works may be represented both as archival software and as ephemeral artifacts, documents, or notices of one kind or another. Meanwhile, research coming from various institutions appears bent on mining the same sources while alternative publications and Websites from less predictable sources are being ignored.

On one level, the topic of re-performance appears to hold the attention of some observers in denial of more pressing issues, such as the impact of global economy on the future of a deeply faulted art market, now involving “live art”—a topic that deserves serious attention. Instead of going this route, it would appear that the topic at hand has become typically self-indulgent as increasing numbers of mostly younger performance artists—and museum curators who support them—are scrambling for appointments with destiny, hoping their work will be placed on virtual call in the future. One might say that to contemplate the exigencies of performing a work of body art by an artist from another time at another youthful moment, based on extant documentation, archived to the teeth, is like transferring a four-by-five-inch photographic negative into a digital image or copying a reel-to-reel Portapak tape into a DVD format. As Philip Auslander correctly, though reticently suggests in his superlative essay published in PAJ 84 (September 2006), there is the question as to whether performances produced on the basis of archival documentation might lose some of the vitality of the performance, assuming the vitality was there in the first place. Assuming it was there, the question might arise as to what future artist would want to do it. Would he or she appear like a performance clone functioning...
as a replica of the original? How different is this from those vapid copies of De Chirico’s early *pittura metafisica* (1911–16) painted decades later by the same artist? In either case, there are simulations—not even convincing ones, but self-willed fakes. Whether Abramović or De Chirico, the artists have fashioned replicas of works created by themselves at another time period that might easily be translated in terms of a fetish.

In either case, re-performance carries a heavy dose of overdetermination and therefore is liable to transform itself into unmitigated kitsch. One might ask: What is the essential difference between performing a saccharine tableau vivant of Thomas Couture’s *Romans in the Decadence of the Empire* (1847) in the mid-twentieth century—a century after the painting was shown at the Salon in Paris—or re-performing Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972) in the twenty-first century? The unforeseeable problem in both cases is that the historical moment that contextualizes the performance has inevitably disappeared. One might speculate that a tableau vivant of the Couture performed a century later would be appreciated primarily in terms of kitsch. *Seedbed,* however, presents a slightly different problem in that it is intrinsically unrelated to kitsch. Unlike the more traditional performing arts, i.e., theatre, music, or opera, the historical moment for Acconci’s *Seedbed* has become overtly connected to the work’s context.

As a result, it has been locked into a period of time related to the history of contemporary art. The only recourse by which to unlock this academic connection to history would be to transcend the moment of its conception through the literary imagination. In Acconci’s case, one might argue in relation to Heidegger’s point regarding hermeneutics: that to get to the original meaning of the texts in the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, it is necessary to reinterpret these plays less from the position of their historical moment, than in relation to the present. For this to succeed, one would have to locate an accurate historical equivalent in order to properly recontextualize the meaning of the work.

While the process of hermeneutics is a delicate one, one cannot ignore it in relation to the problem of re-performance. The point is that simply reviving a performance that was essentially within a microcosm of historical time at its first performance will have difficulty in surviving unless adjustments are made within the ongoing present. If this proposition were correct, it would mean that the role of the archivist in performance art is secondary or even tertiary to the experiential component that allows for this historical equivalent to emerge. To return the vitality to a work by Acconci would require some adjustments that may be in opposition to the original intention. As changes occur within the course of history—an idea that appears in suspension as the presence of media has had a dominant effect—the legitimacy of re-performance from an archival point of view will most likely require a serious re-evaluation. Experience in art—what used to be called aesthetics—is still the ultimate criterion, whether we are referring to John Dewey, Susanne Langer, or John Berger. Does performance art require an experience to exist within the history of art, or does it hold some other archival criterion?
The Ballerina and the Poet from Loves of a Ballerina, 1986 (2.5 minutes) and in From the Archives of Modern Art, 1989 (18 minutes). 16mm black and white film. Photo: Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.
Given its radical edge there are some who would argue that performance art is different, and that political and ideological issues have emerged in recent years that set it apart from art in other mediums. This is an argument worth considering, if one still subscribes to the notion that mediumistic differences are necessarily parallel to ideological ones. One of the important issues raised by postmodernism—and by Rosalind Krauss, in particular, in her brilliant analysis of the time-based work of the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers—is that mediumistic pluralities argue against limiting an ideological point of view to a single medium. If Krauss is correct, which I believe she is, then performance art is less about limiting itself to a single course of ideology than opening up new thresholds of psychological, narrative and interactive content.

A good example would be an exhibition, entitled *Feeling what no longer is*, which opened at the A.I.R. Gallery in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn in April 2010. Curated by Serra Sabuncuoglu, the exhibition included seven artists—all women—four of whom focused on diverse aspects of performance. They included Eleanor Antin, Elaine Angelopoulos, Kata Mejía, and Sophie Callé. Antin, who lives in Southern California, is a preeminent figure in the early history of performance art coming from a feminist perspective. Her fictional narrative based on Eleonora Antinova, a legendary black ballerina in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, offers an interesting intervention into the problem of re-performance by transforming her artistic persona into the genre of silent film. Antin began as a performance artist, not as aspiring film actress. The distinction is not incidental. By simulating the appearance of silent film à la Eisenstein, Antin becomes an auteur taking full control of her medium. In Rudolf Arnheim’s famous book, *Film as Art*, he argues that silent film offers the possibility of art. Because of the absence of sound there are limitations that necessitate more subtle maneuvers in communicating emotion. Antin appears to have taken this idea seriously by adding a remarkable sense of irony in the process.

Rather than fretting over archival notes, documents and related ephemera, Antin’s *The Ballerina and the Poet* (1986) opens an alternative window to the future of performance art. Essentially the film becomes the complete embodiment of her actions, the place where everything is finally said, while ingeniously mixing humor and insight with a full awareness of simulation. In Antin’s case, the concept of re-performance is irrelevant in that the performance does not need to persist as “live art” beyond the medium of film. Rather than documenting an action on film or video as seen in the early body art of Acconci, Nauman, and Oppenheim, Antin goes for the fracture of the story line—the daily foibles, sexual and otherwise, between a struggling poet and a ballerina—as a kind of absurdist paradoxical overlay. Antin never removes herself entirely from the complex premise that she is performing. Thus, we gather both her artistic intention and the narrative effects enhanced through the medium of film as a simultaneous event. The fact of temporality throughout her performance never ceases to exist. Put another way, the language of Eisenstein’s “film form” continues to function for Antin in the terms of a perpetual verb conjugation.
The Colombian-born performance artist, Kata Mejía, also included in the exhibition at A.I.R., has a different point of view. While she uses the edited DVD format to document and thereby perpetuate her performances, each of her works appears to exist in a separate time and space. For example, Mejía performed a work called Mending at A.I.R. in which she wore a mask made from a cabbage leaf and then preceded to sew leaves from four heads of cabbage into one giant cabbage. Of course, the action was absurd, if not impossible, which was part of her intention. It was a deeply psychological piece as if to “repair the damage” from the past while also recognizing that the past cannot be repaired, and that life goes on. Given the sheer energy and emotional intensity that Mejía employs in her work, it would seem incredible that another artist could deliver the same quality of content through re-performance. Her statement suggests the she is the one who understands best what she is attempting to make happen: “My work uses repetition to deal with compulsion and those moments when rational thought is so deeply affected by chaos and disruption as to cause a state of emergency within us.”

In works such as A Mark a Day (2004), performed in Chicago, Mejía spent twelve hours over a duration of six days (approximately two hours a day) drawing a series of horizontal bands on the walls of a room, using red pigment on a rag inside her mouth with her hands tied behind her. In a series of works in 2007 for the LAB Gallery at the Roger Smith Hotel in New York, she dealt with grieving the loss of her younger brother who was murdered by a major drug cartel in Medellin. One work, titled Homage to a Hero (Day 1), involved the artist lying in a pool of black ink surrounded by candles. At regular intervals she would go from the ink pool to the adjacent wall and create an impression of her figure, visually reminiscent of Yves Klein’s anthropometric paintings (1960) performed in Paris. But Mejía’s actions were more rigidly systematic than Klein’s. In Homage to a Hero, the nearly exact replications of her impressed figure were lined up equidistantly on two walls over a two-day period in which she made a public performance an hour-and-a-half each day. In Homage to a Hero (Day 2), she walked to and from the various inked impressions leaving her trails in flour on the floor over a four-day period. In a third performance, titled Healing, she placed her head in a wooden bowl filled with red paint, then pushed it against the wall, allowing the pigment to spill down to the floor, whereupon she used her hair as a brush to pull the red paint in even row from one side of the gallery to another. Here again, one can trace this action to an early Fluxus work by the Korean-born artist Nam June Paik who also used his head as a brush in the early sixties.

This is to suggest that despite the intensity of Kata Mejía’s performances, there are antecedents that are important, often performed with very different intentions. It would be like saying that once Pollock poured paint, no one else should do it. But the course of art does not function that way. Nothing comes out of the void. There are always antecedents. Whether or not they are stated in the writing of critics is another matter. But to see the continuity of ideas in art—albeit with different intentions—is important to clarifying the genre of performance. In this sense, Kata Mejía is no exception. The appropriation of tools within the course of her own clearly developed
actions are important for her work, and no other artist can repeat it exactly. To re-
perform a work by Kata Mejía would subvert the genre of performance art to the
extent that the content would most likely become diffused.

Although the term “re-performance” is recent, the phenomenon is very much a part
of twentieth-century modernism. From a European perspective, there is little doubt
that the Futurist, Constructivist, Dadaist, and Bauhaus artists were all concerned
with sustaining their work, that is, making it appear “contemporary” well into the
future, and therefore becoming part of Art History. From the perspective of what
Americans call “contemporary art,” the idea goes back to the 1960s and 1970s when
performance art and body art were at the forefront of a New York revisionist avant-
gardism. Fluxus was clearly prominent in these endeavors. Artists such as Alison
Knowles, Jackson Mac Low, Dick Higgins, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Yoko
Ono, Benjamin Patterson, and Philip Corner came from diverse backgrounds in
literature, music, dance, philosophy, and mathematics into performance. Although
the Lithuanian immigrant artist George Maciunas may be credited as the architect
of the Fluxus movement in which these artists performed corporeal actions either as
abbreviated or over an extended duration of time, using subversively charged objects,
ideas and other natural substances, it was Allan Kaprow who most effectively defined
the notion of participatory art in the form of his Happenings. From Kaprow’s point
of view, the Happenings were meant to parallel urban complexity, chaos, conflict, and
dissidence, and thereby contributed metaphorically to the raw material of advanced
art. In 1961, he explained: “Their form is open-ended and fluid; nothing obvious is
sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences
to which we are more than normally attentive. They exist for a single performance,
or only a few, and are gone forever as new ones take their place.”

As a seminal post-abstract expressionist artist, Kaprow experimented with several
different concepts and processes ultimately related to a new concept of performance.
He was profoundly influenced by Pollock, less in terms of the paintings than in
the way he moved physically as an artist while in the process of working. This led
Kaprow in 1956 to begin thinking of an art of time—what was later called time-
based art—in the sense that art could be fully temporal. As made clear by the artist,
his art existed for the time of “a single performance, or only a few, and are gone
forever.” These neo-dadaist, Gutai-inspired Happenings began while Kaprow was
Teaching at Douglass College on the campus of Rutgers University in 1958, and
persisted throughout the decade of the 1960s, where several important Happenings
were staged in New York and elsewhere. By the end of that decade, he decided to
move from New York to California and to accept a position teaching at the newly
founded California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. At the outset of the 1970s,
Kaprow began to reconsider the notion of time and duration in his work and to reflect
on the impermanence of the form he had created more than a decade earlier.

As a result, a new direction emerged in his work influenced by behavioral psychology
and sociology, which his chronicler Michael Kirby called “Activities.” During this
transitional period in his career, Kaprow realized that the ephemerality of this new,
A and C, arranging photos into story

B, watching for right moment, saying “Freeze!” (A and C, freezing pose),
B, taking Polaroid flash

A, C and B, repeating sequence until photo pleases
smaller scale work required a more clearly defined set of notations. The Activities were more precise in their movements and gestures than the Happenings. While his work continued to flourish in Europe—particularly in Germany—Kaprow was falling out of favor in the New York art world. Although less in vogue here, his new work with its emphasis on subjectivity, the body, narrative interpretation, cultural specificity, and shifting cultural contexts would play an instrumental role in how his works would be interpreted and understood in Europe. Without intending it, Kaprow was re-emerging again, this time at the forefront of postmodernism.

In contrast to media-publicized Happenings, such as Courtyard (1962) and Household (1964), the lesser known Activities of the seventies offered a more structuralist investigation into everyday routines and private interactions. Whereas the Happenings generally involved large groups of participants improvising in relation to various loosely built constructions involving wooden scaffolding covered in tar paper or discarded objects, within a given space, the Activities consisted of predetermined actions based on highly structured routines derived from everyday life. In works such as Comfort Zones and Echo-Logy (both from 1975), Kaprow understood the importance of creating a time-based performance in which a set number of participants interacted with one another, often through repetition. In Comfort Zones, for example, a male participant rushes toward a standing female, swerving to avoid her, while trying to make eye contact. This process is repeated until eye contact is actually made, and the female participant says the word “now.” It was essential that the participants in Kaprow’s Activities were not professional actors. Rather they performed in the vernacular sense of enacting a role according to a given set of explicit instructions. (In each case, Kaprow published something similar to “how-to” booklets in which instructions were accompanied by documentary photographs that described the actions of the participants.)

The recent incarnation of re-performance comes largely as a result of the extraordinary packaging and publicity given to Marina Abramović’s Seven Easy Pieces (2005) at the Guggenheim and her retrospective, titled The Artist is Present, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in early 2010. In Seven Easy Pieces, which occurred over a week’s time in November, Abramović re-presented five works by artist-colleagues, including Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Gina Pane, and the late Joseph Beuys. On the sixth and seventh evenings, she re-performed and re-interpreted Lips of Thomas (original 1973/74) and a new work, titled Entering the Other Side (2005). The questions and eventual debate centering on the issue of re-performance became startlingly clear over the course of the week. In contrast to the archival approach to performance, Abramović took considerable liberties in terms of how she re-staged the various events—changing this, adding that—while at the same time inserting, subtracting and improvising new possibilities and ideas for a re-interpretation of the original events, both in her own work and in the works by the other artists. There were, of course, contradictions in these performances in terms of her stated intentions, but these did not seem to interfere with the power of the various works.
On the other hand, the contradictions seemed to accurately align themselves with Heidegger’s position regarding the Greek plays. To keep these works alive meant that the artist had to perpetually envision them within the present. From a critical perspective, *Seven Easy Pieces* was somehow intentionally, conceptually, visually, and dramatically more clear than the youthful models used in *The Artist is Present* to reconfigure a selection of the more “static” works in her oeuvre, including both her singular performances and those done with her partner, Ulay, from roughly the mid-1970s to the late-1980s. In spite of the artist’s attempts to engage her performance students in a kind of physical and mental preconditioning, such as walking nude in the forest and swimming in cold water, the aura surrounding these vignettes was remarkably unconvincing. From the perspective of this visitor, there was no energy, no real spunk.

The experiential aspect of *Seven Easy Pieces* somehow did not translate to *The Artist is Present*, either in terms of the student poses (in which shifts were arranged to give necessary breaks to these mostly nude participants) or in Abramović’s own performance in the Marron Atrium of MoMA where she sat across from museum-goers with a table between them at regular intervals during museum hours throughout the course of the exhibition, which was nearly three months. Again, the title piece performed in the retrospective felt static in the sense that the use of endurance seemed more imposed than natural. Apparently, the artist was seeking to offer a kind of transformative experience for her mostly youthful visitors, possibly related to what she believed they might expect from a Guru in northern India or from an aboriginal shaman living in central Australia or the Amazon region of Brazil. In any case, a certain visible posing at the table became inevitable—in spite of the artist’s attempts to avoid it—given the large audience that perpetually stood in this central meeting space between the rising towers of static art world on all sides. In a way, one might understand that for a performance artwork to enter a museum over time it would summarily need to be static. Over the years, attempts to give kinesis or action to museum interiors have revealed some interesting moments, but the tendency of the object/viewer relationship continues to predominate through it all.

Concurrently, the revival of interest in re-performance—which arguably had its contemporary origins as a self-conscious intention with Kaprow’s Activities, and later, beginning in 1988, in variations on *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (original 1959)—has emerged as a pronounced, if not competitive pursuit in the field of *archivism* (author’s word), especially among institutions focused on collecting and maintaining works of modern and contemporary art. As a result we now have artists’ notes, e-files, sketches, and statements being catalogued along with all manner of photographs, posters, fliers, cards, relics, properties, vestiges, flight menus, press kits, clippings, reviews, essays, and publications under the now legitimated institutional category of performance art. Given the expansion of archival departments in various prestigious institutions, such as The Museum of Modern Art in New York, archivists doggedly pursue the acquisition of documents while organizing Smithsonian-style interviews and symposia with performance artists, entrepreneurs, curators, academic theorists, organizers, fund-raisers, and—budget permitting—art critics.
Relative to *18 Happening in 6 Parts*, and its venues of re-performance, there have been several different attempts, including one sponsored by the University of Texas at Arlington (1988) and performed in New York as part of the Preceding retrospective (partially sponsored by Zabriskie Gallery) and a second sponsored by Performa in New York in 2007. In contrast to the posthumous 2007 re-creation of the Happening, the artist decided that for the earlier Arlington/New York performance, he would work according to a structural mode and radically alter the surface appearance of the original Happening in the Reuben Gallery in New York. Instead of translucent plastic compartments in a static interior space as in 1959, the artist elected to go out-of-doors into the streets of Manhattan and have the participants arrange meetings with one another in which they exchanged pockets full of hay throughout the course of a day. (Given that cell phones were not prevalent even three decades later, these meetings proved somewhat precarious.) Later in the afternoon, the participants reconvened at a loft in lower Manhattan to discuss their encounters and the meaning of the event. This was, indeed, a re-performance, but radically different in its appearance from the original version. This suggests that Kaprow understood the structural basis of his work as a work of art that could transcend the obvious appearance of stasis. In 1988—nearly thirty years after the original—kinesis replaced stasis in terms of its spatial referent.

In recent years, the artist Tino Sehgal has made his presence known in New York after working throughout Europe for several years. It was the decision of the Guggenheim Museum of Art to introduce him with a couple of works, one older, titled *Kiss* (2002), and a second, titled *This Progress* (2006). Generally, Sehgal presents his work in terms of nearly invisible events, intimate exchanges, and songs (more like ditties, really), either within the context of existing exhibitions or, in the case of Guggenheim, as an addendum to an ongoing fiftieth-year celebration of the museum architecture and its architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. There are no objects in Sehgal’s performative works. There are no statements, no placards on the wall, no catalogues. He refuses to call his work performance art or happenings. Rather they exist as a kind of “staged situation,” thus recalling the spontaneous conversion pieces of the conceptual artist Ian Wilson from the late-1960s and 1970s.

In short, there would be very little to archive, but infinite possibilities to re-perform. The question for the future of this art may hinge on whether or not Sehgal’s “staged situations” will continue to have vitality once they have outlived their historical moment or what some might call a trend. Yet there is another possibility. Maybe the art of the future will forego the necessity of spunk in favor of blankness. Indeed, there are signs of this happening in other reaches of the art world as contemporary art is moving ever closer to becoming a form of economic totalism, thus completely erasing any need to discern qualitative differences. If such a scenario would to become possible, then re-performance might become the simulation of what art once was and thus the disappearance of any need for originality or diversity within the human experience. Without the tactile world, there can no history; and where there is no history, there can no art.
Can archivism save art from disappearing? It depends on what we really want to do, and on what we hope to achieve. What is the positive side to having virtual museums? Do we really need to save all the objects, actions, and documents so they can be instantly programmed for re-performance in the future? This is, of course, within the realm of possibility. But the question still remains whether anyone would care enough to retrieve them. In many ways, this is a question larger than art, but one that is unavoidable if art is to remain the repository of experience by people in future generations who will live, love, care, work, think, and play, very much like ourselves.

NOTES


9. Tino Sehgal was shown at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, January 29–March 10, 2010.


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