

## PERFORMANCE AFTER THE FACT

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We hated the word 'performance'; we couldn't, wouldn't, call what we did 'performance.' Because 'performance' didn't appear in the middle of nowhere; 'performance' had a place, and that place by tradition was a theater, and that theater was a target, a point you went toward and an enclosure you immersed yourself in. But we didn't want you to come to us and be in our 'world,' a world that 'we' had formed, a transformation of the real world; we wanted, instead, a region that was a section of the accustomed world that everybody knows and that you simply as a matter of course passed by, that you chose sometimes of your own accord to go through. The problem with 'point' and 'enclosure' -- whether it took the form of 'museum' or it took the form of 'theater' -- was that it was a separate entity, set off from the world around it. This separation meant that only some people could be part of what was separated, only people who were already initiated into that specialized world-within-a-world, from which all the others were already left out; this separation meant, too, that what was separated off was automatically focused on, concentration was pre-determined, the point and enclosure were abstractions of the world and not the messy world itself.

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The streets were ours. We took our cue from the song of a few years before: why don't we do it in the road?

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The problem with doing work in the streets was: the work would fall into ready-made categories -- either it was a 'happening' or it was a 'demonstration.' But those words were yesterday's papers, those words came out of the 60's. Since the streets, then, were already encoded into another time, we had to get off the streets and go back home. We had to find a home, or make a home for ourselves. We had two choices of housing: that home could have been the theater, or it could have been the gallery. We chose the gallery because we saw the gallery (we wanted to see the gallery) as an analogue of the street, a representation of the street; our model was the New York gallery, like 420 West Broadway, where -- rather than having just one gallery as a destination -- you walked from floor to floor, you meandered through five floors. The gallery, like the street, was not a node you stopped at but a circulation route that you passed through; going to galleries was like window-shopping.

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Seeing the gallery as a street was a formalization, or a self-imposed blindness. The building-full-of-galleries should have

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been seen, more sharply, as the analogue or representation of the convention center or the shopping mall.

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On the one hand, performance of the 70's was performance in the light: instead of a performance on stage and in the spotlight that broke the darkness, what we gave was a performance at high noon, when the light was everywhere and everything was light, a performance in the light of day that the performance itself couldn't escape, where the performance melted into its surroundings and became part of everyday life. On the other hand, performance of the 70's acted as if it hadn't always been in the light, it behaved as if it had been pulled (forcibly, grudgingly) into the light; for that to happen, the performance itself had to have originated in the dark, it had to come out of the dark, the performance (no matter how glaringly light its situation was) had to itself be deep and dark: the performance functioned as a dark disturbed night in the middle of the day, the performance worked like a dirty little secret -- the performance was a place-in-itself, the bedroom wrenched out of the privacy of one's own home and exposed in the middle of the town-square.

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Either the performance blended into the woodwork, so that it was hardly noticed; or the performance was so set apart from its surroundings that the performer could be called a criminal or a crazy. In either case, performance sought the light; it sought distribution, it sought credibility. The gallery, and the art magazines it supported, shed light on performance; performance shared the light of the gallery, bathed in the light of the gallery, performance became credible and done in the name of 'art' as long as it appeared in the gallery. Light means distribution; light also is the glitter of gold; distribution comes with money, and so does art.

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People did performance in order not to do painting and sculpture. Painting and sculpture had the power of the One True God of Art; performance was a way to intrude, in the middle of a single-belief system, the swarm of multiple gods. This purpose might have been equally served by any old alternative medium, but not quite; what performance did was more specific and more pointed, or maybe just more blunt -- performance functioned not as an addition to other media but as a takeover, a replacement. Into the art space, into a world of objects and things, performance let the body loose, like a bull in a china shop: into a world of contemplation, performance introduced action -- into a world of representation, performance introduced fact -- into a world of mind, performance introduced flesh -- into a world of universals, performance introduced the vulnerability of universals, performance introduced transience.

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On the one hand, performance imposed the unsaleable onto the store that the gallery is. On the other hand, performance built that store up and confirmed the market-system: it increased the gallery's sales by acting as window-dressing and by providing publicity.

There was one way I loved to say the word 'performance,' one meaning of the word 'performance' that I was committed to: 'performance' in the sense of performing a contract -- you promised you would do something, now you have to carry that promise out, bring that promise through to completion. Performance was the literal embodiment of an idea; it was a way of denying mind/body separation; it was as if the performer were saying: look, I have this idea, but talk is cheap, so don't believe me, don't trust me -- instead, step right up and touch me, my body is proving my idea by going through the motions. Performance was analagous to the situation of the stand-up comedian: the lights go on, you have to do something, the audience is waiting like hungry wolves, this is the point of no return, there's no turning back now.

I remember a scene from Haskell Wexler's Medium Cool, a movie about the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, a movie about the Chicago Eight. the movie mixes fiction with documentary footage; at one point, during the filming of a riot, you can hear the voice of the camera-person off-screen: 'Look out, Wexler,' he's shouting, 'this is real!' Performance of the 70's acted as if it was real; the guise was: this is happening just as it would be happening even if you the viewer didn't happen to be here -- or, this is happening with you the viewer as part of it, as if we've all been together for a long long time. But the belief couldn't hold up, the facts showed the theory for the wishful thinking it was: this 'real' wasn't there before and continuing into this performance moment, this 'real' was only just born for this purpose, this 'real' was set up, this 'real' was for performance's sake. Performance of the 70's was the establishment of crisis moments, an Alladin's lamp meant to rub the real into existence.

The last performance I ever did was a piece called Ballroom; it was done in Florence in 1973. The gallery was turned into a dance-hall: a circle of white tables and chairs around the 'dance-floor,' where three spotlights shone down from the ceiling. I was in the center of the circle: I'm walking, semi-dancing, from spot to spot on the floor -- I'm looking down, I'm turned inward -- it's more that I'm reflecting on something rather than

exhibiting myself to an audience. In the background there's sound: on one channel of an audiotape my voice hums Al Jolson's Anniversary Song (I'm changing tempos, my hum is absent-minded, I'm shifting styles and arrangements); on the other channel I'm talking to 'you,' a specific 'you,' someone involved in my life: '...I'm dancing with you, Nancy...But wait, now Kathy is cutting in...So I'm dancing with you, Kathy...' Every now and then, I step out of the spotlight, I break out of my closed circle and approach one of the tables: a flashlight shines on my face, I've picked out at random a person sitting at the table, I'm making a sexual advance, I'm begging, I'm helpless as a child: '...look, neither Nancy nor Kathy really understands me...but you'd understand me...you'd know what to do with me...' The piece was performed for three consecutive nights; the first two nights were without incident, the performance went smoothly, as the saying goes, and lived up to its name 'performance,' it was just like acting, it was like putting on a show. But then there was the third night... On the third night, as I approached a table and entreated and tried to seduce, a woman got up and hugged me, she held me tight: I couldn't pretend this wasn't happening, this was something I couldn't just walk away from. Okay, I said, if you want to take Kathy or Nancy's place, then you have to do as they would have done, you have to be them, you have to take the bad times along with the good. So I got my arms loose somehow and hit her, I slapped her hard across the face. That didn't stop her, she held me closer. What's left, I say, what do we do now: all we can do is fuck, right here, right now. She gets down on the floor then, she's lying down on her back, her arms outstretched, she waits for me. But I can't go on, I can only go back. I walk back into the spotlight, return to my closed circle, close myself up in my audio dreams of Nancy and Kathy.

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In retrospect I could put it this way: I thought, probably without even thinking about it, that I knew my audience -- these were Italians, their attitude would be one of rapt attention in front of 'art,' dead quiet as if at a church. But I hadn't counted on an American student, which is what that woman was; I hadn't accounted for the presence of the misfit, the Ugly American, the person who doesn't know the rules or who knowingly breaks them anyway, the naif, the bull in the china shop...That bull in the china shop is what, earlier, I called performance art as a whole: this is how performance art functioned in relation to the art gallery and the art world. My use of the same metaphor to refer to both performance in general and to a person who reacted to a particular performance obliges me to connect action with theory. This specific instance, of an American woman re-forming a performance in a foreign country, might be used as data for two propositions: #1. That 70's performance art was meant to be women's art, that its mode of operation was inherently feminist -- performance art could not have happened if it weren't for a revolution against male power-conventions of abstraction and order and public distance; and #2. That performance art was an American art, the continuation and renovation and last gasp of Abstract Expressionism before Europe returned and fought back

with Neo-Expressionism -- the performance-artist was the re-enactment of Jackson Pollock walking and pouring over a canvas laid on the floor, of John Wayne in a John Ford movie, the performance-artist was the anticipation of Ronald Reagan as president. This second proposition, however, was used to suppress the first: the performance-artists that the art media chose to distribute were embodiments of the American pioneer -- in choosing those artists and not others, the media enforced a reading of 'American' as male -- performance art was the continuation of one exploitation, American exploitation, and the start of another, a male exploitation of feminist ideology, an attempt to nip it in the bud. The thing is: who first used the word 'performance' to refer to this work? which gender felt more comfortable using that word? was the connotation 'sexual performance,' that a man worries over, or was it the 'performance' of women before the eyes of men and in roles designed to please men? And now that we're talking like this: why were the things that we did called 'pieces'? just what's being talked about here anyway, and what exactly is being grabbed at?

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After Ballroom was over, I could never perform again. Because Ballroom now was out in the open as evidence, that stared both myself and others right in the face: it was proof that my 'performances' promised more than they (or I) could (or would) deliver. The performer remained in the end a performer, the audience remained in the end an audience: we were only playing the roles of participants, as if we were both doomed to be in a 'performance' that wasn't even mine but that had been designed by some Performance God in the Sky whose tradition couldn't be broken. The (sexual, personal) relationship that joined performer and audience was never meant to be actualized, it was only potential, it was only a tease; in the end we all knew our place and we kept it; this world wasn't real but was only a model that was in the long run too fragile for people to enter -- the space that was put forward as experiential turned out to be after all only visual, the action might as well have been a picture (that's the way it was going to be historically preserved anyway).

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(I just told you a story. Now let me tell you a secret: that wasn't really my last performance. Two years later, when my work had changed into installations, I did what in fact was -- honest, you can believe me this time -- my final performance. It was a piece out of nowhere, a piece apparently out of context, it was as if I had come back from the dead. My performance mode, my persona, was different now: I was sitting at a table, I paged through books and read out fragments of other people's autobiographies -- I was a compiler and not an originator, I was a scholar more than a practitioner. The piece didn't fit the myth that had been made of me as a performer and that I had helped make myself: that myth demanded that I be involved not in the world of books but in the world of bodies -- that myth demanded that my presence be

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sexual and not neutered. So my last performance had to be, for all intents and purposes, Ballroom: the last gasp of performance that threw the male at the mercy of women. All the while, the real last performance, Projection Room, was probably more true -- honest, you can trust me -- to my everyday life, more true to my normal presentation of self: here is the person who reads and writes because that person cannot -- or at least, doesn't -- do. The performances that everybody knows about, on the other hand, let me do what i couldn't or wouldn't do at home.)

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Performance art turns out to be therapeutic. It's something that people do at the beginning of their careers. Its function is to per-form art as we know it at the time and, thereby, to re-form and trans-form it. Performance art is a space in-between, a kind of half-way house that cures an addiction to objects and products and allows people to function on their own power and to depend on their own persons. Sooner or later, however, a person has to get out of therapy and get on with his/her own life. The problem with performance art is that it has no place it can call its own: if it's in a theater, if it's in a gallery or museum, if it's in the street, then it fades out of its own classification and slips into the categories of those other arenas. This 'problem' with performance art is also the benefit of performance art: it destroys itself as it is being made -- it can never be pinned down because it has already disappeared -- as soon as it exists in fact, in an actual place and in an actual situation, it isn't itself, because it shares the place of something else, it breathes the air of whatever alien place it's in, it starts to become the thing that lives in that place. The ex-performance-artist, then, who had a bias toward the action of performance grows up into theater or music -- the more passive of these ex-performance-artists becomes an actor, the more active becomes a rock star; the ex-performance-artist who had a bias toward the image of performance grows up into movies or television; the ex-performance-artist who had a bias toward the situation and place of performance grows up to be something like an architect; the ex-performance-artist who had a bias toward the effects and consequences of performance grows up to be a terrorist, or a guerilla fighter, or at least a prankster.

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