

Symposium

27 / 28 / 29 October 2017

Curated by Dorothea Rust and Dimitrina Sevova,
co-curated by Denis Pernet

What's Wrong with Performance Art?

The Symposium¹ sets up a two-and-a-half days live event that aims to provide a platform for presenting, discussing and performing Performance Art in performative sessions throughout a panel structure with an accent on moderated discussions and performances. The Symposium strives to generate an energetic open space for aesthetic experience and exchange of knowledge between the current active practitioners in the field of Performance Art(s): artists, curators, performance study researchers, educators, and their publics, those who are committed to Performance Art will share their practices, experience, reflections, thoughts, and research.

The Symposium is a platform that encourages invited participants to give a very direct subjective response from the material objectives of the event itself. The Symposium is quasi-academic and brings together practitioners inside and outside academia to publicly present and discuss their practices and modes of articulation and action. The Symposium operates within the local, interregional and international Performance Art scene. It strives for different perceptions and a new ontology of the relation between Performance and Art, and a pattern of branching that expands the field of live practices.

The Symposium does not aim to produce abstraction by analyzing Performance Art, but to abstract the qualities and experience of the current practices and speculate about their futures without attempting to categorize them. It is not oriented towards its histories, but rather activates its different discourses and narratives able to articulate knowledge that is situated, material and present. The Symposium asks about the relation between Performance and Art now in multiple and constantly changing realities, about art as a living performance. It investigates the current moment of the context of the present art practices and the variety of aesthetic strategies in contemporary Performance and Performativity in Art, and the relation between concepts, percepts and affects, aesthetics

1 The substitution of the commonly used *symposium* by *symposium* is driven by the idea of searching for other sensibilities and vocabulary closer to Performance Art. In botanics, a symposium is a mode of branching of vascular plants, in which further growth continues not in the main axis but from subterminal laterals. The main axis is then in most cases – though not in all – used up by the production of a terminal inflorescence or blossom.

and politics, body and tools, technology and nature. Its connection to life and its impermanence and non-representability make Performance Art(s) accessible mostly from the point of view of practice, to reflect on their variety of ontological differences ranging across many media and fields. The Symposium aims to enrich the emancipatory potential of the agency of mapping. The map has to do with performance, as Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*² – mapping as a process as well as a politics and discursive practice. They are living and tacit forms of knowledge, between action/inaction, between acted and daily life, and implicit knowledge production that encompasses so many different practices, methods, techniques, movements, gestures directly connected to the body and materials, and the materiality of the presence, to this moment yet to come.

Performance has been the starting point for some of the most radical ideas that have changed the way we – artists and audiences – think about art, writes RoseLee Goldberg, from avant-garde movements to nowadays. The first definition of wrong: 'not in accordance with what is morally right or good,' resonates with how Performance Art has been 'smuggling' incorrect, illegal, twisted, crooked and related strategies to subvert existing rigid values, breaking down categories as the artist attempts to push boundaries in new, unexpected ways and indicate new directions. The title of the Symposium *What's Wrong with Performance Art* can be read as a kind of performance itself, as it refers to *Rhythm 0* (Marina Abramović, 1974). The Symposium offers many objects of thoughts without restrictions to be used by the audience as the circulation of a 'performance' inside the discussions from where critique can be performed, asking: "Do risks and unpredictability remain in Performance Art today?" – "Is there still a bullet in the pistol?" – "What kind of weapon is this?" – "Who triggers it nowadays? The artist, the audience, the art institution, the art market, the art Academia, an 'independent' art scene?"

There are doubts about what and how is to be understood by Performance Art(s). Is it Contemporary Performance, Visual Art Performance, Constructed Live Events, Live Art, etc.? Nevertheless, the Symposium does not focus on the question of "What

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis/MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 12.

is Performance Art?," nor does it try to theorize the present based on its historicized past or take part in the controversial debate about the origins of Performance Art(s). In the context of the Symposium, there is more than one origin of Performance Art(s). It crosses different fields, practices, techniques, and movements, strategies and contexts.

Taking a distance from definitions of Performance Art as a genre and the hierarchies produced by a classification order, like *body art* "soft machine" technologies vs. hard technologies, or *time based art*, or a description of Performance Art as a medium. The Symposium explores and tests the political and aesthetic potentialities of performance practices today, where and how Performance Art is performed today, and by whom.

Is there an aesthetic shift 'from haptic and distance aesthetic forms into immersive and affective force' in all fields of visual art, that take Performance Art(s) from the margins of visual arts and contemporary art and elevates it to institutional visibility? Today there is considerable interest towards Performance Art by the large art institutions, the international Biennial circuit, art fairs, the system of grants of different cultural polices, local and international festivals, world-wide art studio exchange programs, etc. There is a tendency for contemporary Performance Art(s) to be collected by museums and presented in white cube galleries, beacon festivals and the celebrations of large institutions (Manifesta 2016 in Zürich, Performance Art Award, Art Basel, the Tate Modern's Performance Room, etc.). The art system builds everywhere "art bays" for performances, or performance rooms, or something else that can be used to host Performance Art(s) permanently or temporarily. How do these new contexts influence performance practices and more generally what is accepted there as Performance Art?

According to Marina Abramović, "In the case of performance, I would say that public and performer are not only complementary but almost inseparable." Her notion of *unit* between the performance artist and the audience during the duration of the performance piece lead her to state that "The energy generated by this *unit* [...] creates a *brand new community*." The Symposium interrogates the role of the audience and the new participation driven forms that are able to create *brand new community*? What kind of brand, and what kind of a community is generated by Performance Art today?

Katie Kitamura contends that "Once left behind by the competitive market, live art is now everywhere – thanks in large part to its staunchest advocate, RoseLee Goldberg." In the same article she discusses performance art's accumulation in the art market: "Historically the most anti-commercial of art forms, performance is now a fixture at art fairs, the organizers of which have found that live art adds a sense of occasion to the experience of shopping in a hangar."³

Economization exerts its influence on art practices, and although Performance Art(s) are still less accommodated by the art market, which nonetheless

³ Katie Kitamura, "Art Matters | The Second Life of Performance," *T – The New York Times Style Magazine*, 10 June 2014 <<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/10/performa-roselee-goldberg-interview-performance-art-book/>> (accessed 2016-09-19).

uses different strategies for its assimilation, to "activate a room" for an exhibition of artworks whose 'material' is the human being. If Performance Art(s) are no longer anti-market, what kind of market do Performance Art(s) have? Who collects them, and how are performance artists represented, or by what kind of galleries or companies? Are Performance Art(s) rather the warm-up act creating a good mood for the shopping experience? And in the same line of questions: Is the body still the main material of Performance Art(s) today?

Talking today about global art, let us listen to critical research voices which find that Performance Art(s) descend from "non-western art," being rooted not only in the reaction of art movements in Europe against World War I, but also post World War II Japan, with the Ankoku Butoh (dance of darkness) and Gutai movement, a portmanteau of *tool* and *body*, which deal with the relationships between body, matter, time, and space, and the two qualities of their practices of *embodiment* and *concreteness*, creating a space for experimenting as a reaction against abstract art, a space for freedom of expression. Both movements aim "to go beyond abstraction" at a time when abstract art was being ideologically inserted and had become a hegemonic artistic language. They also reacted against the atomic bomb, the rapid technologization and economic growth in post-war Japan.

Some concerns with Performance Art – Symposium input and reflections on contexts and practices

It seems that there are two different ends when it comes to Performance Art. Performance produces a 'double effect' and spans performance practices and the perception of them between two different ends or in-between two different poles, which generate even more dissensus and difference in the field(s) of Performance Art:

Performance Art as a Myth: Performance art isolates itself as a practice of singularity. Its aesthetic sensibility is a material presence of now-here, drawn from everywhere. Its material *actions* are ephemeral phenomena, universal, subversive, live-acts and events that test the limit and not only resist documentation, but interrupt the system of representation and take across other fields of visibility of this moment in the immense wholeness of reality. In the presence, time does not exist. Artists define themselves as performance artists, and for them the body continues to be the subject and medium in Performance. It emancipates itself from the two-folded thread of its identification with everyday life, in which Performance would not be Performance Art, as it takes elements from all possible experience, different arts, and different techniques, making a montage like a *bricoleur*. Every Performance differentiates aesthetic space from what it is not. Philosophy influences practice or practices that influence contemporary philosophy, like phenomenology and post-structuralism. Performance Art is "embodied philosophy" and "conceptual limit of philosophy."

Performance Art is obsolete: Its strategies from 'other times' are today absorbed by all art and other

cultural practices, everything being about performance art (social, political, economic). Daily life is driven by the invisible automated power of an algorithmic performance. Artists work with different media and technologies. Critical practices, anthropology, ethnography, gender studies, cultural theory, activism and globalization influence practices and culture, as they critically interrogate performance and performativity and adopt them in their methodological tool set and vocabulary.

Today's performative economy relies on logistic management and the flow of control, which are performed by an algorithm. Performance is a part of the technological sophistication and complexity of our current realities. Wall Street has adopted its language. We all perform labor, and invisible powers control the very gestures that produce differentiated immaterial goods. The invisible spectacle changes the index of the body, from the disciplined to the controlled body, the body of surveillance and panoptic optical object. How does this shift change Performance Art, and how does it deal with control vs. the uncontrolled?

Some artists and curators seem to think that Performance Art is not contemporary anymore. What remains of it? How does it transform itself? What is the relation between Performance and the performative in contemporary art? The performative is defined by J. L. Austin as a speech act, a statement that cannot be considered true or false, but rather a success or a failure in accomplishing an act by means of its enunciation, with its constitutive promises and potentiality to fabricate and change the reality of power relations. Birgit Pelzer, in "The integral Calculus of Ambiguities," takes the performative beyond the language game operations: "a performative is less a saying than a doing." She distinguishes between the meaning of the statement and the force of the enunciation. For her, the performative lies in the subtle gap between statement and referent, between statement and enunciation. In the forces of enunciation, which are the forces of displacement, lies the self-subverting potentiality of the performative. Performance appears to have a lot in common with the performative, as it mimes referentiality more than it actually enacts it, and brings it to the dimension of failure and non-identity. It increases the multiple confusion between meaning and reference. The performance phenomenon is a dis-adaptation of meaning. In the performance, the will to *non-rhetoric* is evident. Performance thus plays on a sign system with a paradoxically non-semantic passion.⁴

With Birgit Pelzer we would like to ask: "Performance provides the metaphor for this society in such a vacillating manner that one could ask whether or not it resists this zeitgeist or whether it adapts itself to it. Probably it does both, but in what proportions?"⁵

Performance Art, it seems, still holds its temptations even for the Twitter Generation. "Is performance back again?," asks RoseLee Goldberg? The Symposium asks: "*Is Performance Art everywhere?*" Have all other forms

of live art transformed into Performance Art? *E.g.*, are contemporary theater or contemporary dance and music all performance?⁶ Despite that, Performance Art has become an academic discipline, and performance goes mainstream. (RoseLee Goldberg) Today, Performance Art is a serious business.

Today, in the span between these two tendencies (Performance Art as a myth, and Performance as obsolete), there would seem to be two camps: "performance artists" vs. "artists who work in performance." These two different ends come from the same sensible heterogeneous center or from the contradiction between two different poles from which emerge different stages or approaches, from anti-art to expanded art, to theatricalized art and the performative turn, to social and participative, context-collaborative-network practice. There is an affinity between Performance Art and technology, the media arts of the 1980s with video art, the 1990s with VR technology and cyborgs, body technology. Today, social media and smart phones perhaps demand even more participation and new forms of sociality and collectivism? Young artists do not care about the Performance Art canon and its definitions. If there are no rules in Performance Art, what about the methods and techniques? Are there methods (*e.g.*, an Abramović Method) "to underline the importance of the observer and the observant in performance art"? "It's a funny kind of idea that the observers observing become observed." The Symposium interrogates both the method of practices, and the method of research and documentation/archiving of Performance Art.

What kind of relationship lies between Performance Art and performative art practices? What could be the difference between them? Performance Practices are taught or approached in art schools. What could it mean for both ends? From which perspective are we talking about it? What do you mean by Performance Art as you teach it? What kind of specialization is that in the context of the High Art education? What could they mean by Performance Art? How is their relationship to Performance and other relational aesthetics, political actions, public interventions, performative gestures, walks, derives, *etc.*?

Text: Dorothea Rust and Dimitrina Sevova

4 Birgit Pelzer, "Performance or The Integral Calculus of Ambiguities," trans. from the French Oliver Feltham, in Chantal Pontbriand (ed.), *Parachute: The Anthology (1975-2000). Performance & Performativity [Vol. II]*, (Zurich & Dijon: JRP | Ringier & Les presses du reel, 2013), pp. 44-53.

5 B. Pelzer, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

6 In the newspaper Gessnerallee Theater, the then-new director Roger Merguin stated in 2012 that there is no theater anymore (in Gessnerallee). That all is performance.

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