Introduction

Marsha McMann Paludan

As guest-editor of the *JDTC* supplementary issue on performance art, I see myself as editor John Gronbeck-Tedesco's third hand. The ground I've traveled in the last fifteen years as an active participant in renegade performance forms gives me a first hand view. Though my own orientation is weighted in practice, in this collection of articles and performance texts/descriptions/commentaries, an effort has been made to balance theoretical, critical and practical concerns, and male and female voices.

Defined as the "theatricalization of just about anything at all," the catch-all genre of performance art has a provocative history. Veteran performance artist Michael Meyers points to Alfred Jarry as the father of it all. Others claim the performance tradition dates from rebellious European visual artists and poets of the early 1900s and trace the lineage through its more recent manifestations in the Happenings and live art of the 1960s.

On April 18, 1990, Laurie Anderson addressed the Contemporary Music Symposium at the University of Kansas following her performance of *Strange Angels* the previous evening. Billed as the "premier performance artist" (a phrase that sounds to her like a bad translation of German), Anderson spoke to an SRO crowd which had been re-routed from a 400 seat recital hall to a 2,000 seat theatre better equipped to accommodate the unexpected number of admiring fans.[1] Symbol of the current flirtation of performance art with mass culture popularity, Anderson began her informally delivered remarks by acknowledging her roots. The style of her work, she said, did not pop full blown from her own head. She emphasized the "continuity" of the long history of performance art.

As a performance artist, director, choreographer and teacher, Marsha Paludan has been actively engaged in practical research of the creative process for twenty-five years. Instrumental in the development of the Release Technique at the University of Illinois in the mid-sixties, she has taught and performed in colleges and universities throughout the U.S., at Dartington Hall (England), State Theatre School of Amsterdam, in Canada, Australia, Denmark and Ireland.

Nearly ten years ago at New York City's Franklin Furnace, Michael Meyers and I performed *Scenes from an Illustrated History of the World.* In the late seventies, audience interest in performance art was on the rise, but the establishment still held critics hostage. We couldn't get reviewed. The bewildered critics asked, "What is it? It's not theatre. It's not dance or music or visual art or film. And if we don't know what to call it, how can we talk about it?"

Founding editor of *High Performance* and guiding light of Highways performance space, Linda Frye Burnham has followed the evolution of live art since the early seventies. She suggests viewing the work on a wide continuum, one that encompasses Chris Burden's 1972 five day lock-in locker piece, Linda Montano's year-long diary works, the large scale feminist projects of Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, the solo performances of Spaulding Gray, Holly Hughes and Karen Finley, and the high-tech theatrical events of Laurie Anderson, Robert Wilson and Philip Glass. As audience member, performer, critic and producer of performance art for two decades, Burnham observes,

> I have discovered that artists will step across any line you draw around them. The more we try to document and historify performance the more wily and slippery and broad it becomes. The dynamic interaction among the support system, the media, the artist and the viewer has resulted in a credible picture of the performance artist as revolutionary pioneer, a person destined to stretch arts boundaries, test its limits and research its possibilities, almost as if on a dare.[2]

The January 1980 *Life Magazine* ran a photo essay, "Live Art: A flourishing hybrid had Dada as its Daddy." The article noted the expansion of the performance art audience outside avant-garde circles.[3] Laurie Anderson, Sam Hsieh, Joan Jonas, and Michael Meyers, among others, were featured in a full-color spread. During the past decade, a few performance artists have gained mass appeal, achieving rock and movie star reputations (Laurie Anderson, Spaulding Gray). Others (Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Linda Frye Burnham) have received national and international recognition for large-scale installation/performance events and publications addressing critical concerns, feminist issues and social/political/global problems.

Acknowledging the widespread interest in intermedial performance styles, the NEA responded in 1980 by designating a special category of funding for "Inter-Arts." The recent performances of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes have drawn performance art into the center of the current NEA censorship controversy. In July 1990, the NEA denied funding to Hughes, Finley, Tim Miller, and John Fleck because of explicit sexual references in their work. Of that action, Laurie Anderson was quoted as saying, "These artists . . . were sacrificed to the so-called greater good."[4]

In the first public NEA advisory council meeting August 4-6, 1990, the government agency and the artistic community met head on. Attempts at reconciliation failed. The advisory council refused to reconsider funding "controversial" performers and continued to uphold Chairman Frohnmayer's obscenity resolution. Yale drama professor and chairman of the NEA's theatre advisory council David Chambers addressed the advisory council and Frohnmayer. Chambers called for "strong and courageous moral leadership," suggesting the dangers of continuing the present path. Considering himself a "relatively mainstream" theatre practitioner, he cautioned, "I am only as free as Karen Finley is. I am only as free as Holly Hughes is. The proscription on their actions proscribes my imagination. It makes me do one of two things: retreat or rebel."[5] Choreographer Bella Lewitzky and the New School for Social Research are challenging the NEA on the unconstitutionality of the "obscenity clause." In unprecedented solidarity, artists are declaring their independence from government "stipulated" funding. Lewitzky's dance company, the New York Shakespeare Festival, Iowa Writer's Workshop and Paris Review have rejected large grants in protest.

This fall's issue of *JDTC* is in line with the expanding interest since the late seventies of the academic community in performance art. In 1979, *Performing Arts Journal* published Richard Schechner's discussion of Lee Breuer's "postmodern performance" *Shaggy Dog*. Of Breuer's work (and perhaps of much of the preceding decade's performance art work) he wrote, "There is no spine . . . no 'Aristotelian soul' or 'kernel.' The intention is to deconstruct the experiences . . . of the author and director [and his family] into bits of information and strips of behavior. But what does it all mean? There is another step, a process of reconstruction that has not yet taken place in postmodern performance."[6] In the same issue of *PAJ*, Peter Frank watched the approaching eighties, noting "in addition to . . . the purely formal, self-reflexive aspects of their work," there is a return to content. He writes, "The medium is no longer the whole message . . . [There is] a renewed interest in the earliest, heavily intermedial performance styles. . . . What *is* new is the desire of multi-talented artists to apply their various talents to the invention of a single, unified artwork."[7]

In a two-part article on experimental performance in *PAJ* a year later, Schechner saw in the declining American avant-garde an "irreversible trend toward 'intercultural performance.' . . . The big precondition for positive developments out of this interculturalism is the recognition that the avant-garde--experimental performance in all its diversity--is not the leading edge of some mainstream that is forever despising us even while taking our ideas; but a tradition in its own right."[8] From this vantage point, he suggested that the period of intense activity in experimental performance had passed. He saw a kind of "pure pregnancy."

In 1989, Philip Auslander analyzed the popular acceptance of the avant-garde in the 1980s, arguing that the dialogue of postmodern performance with

mass culture/mass media re-established a "reciprocity between itself and its audience."[9] Auslander's *TDR* discussion of the intercourse between performance art and mass culture is given humorous verification by the Matt Groening cartoon printed in the *Philadelphia City Paper* April 1990 classifieds. Perhaps in response to Karen Finley's recent performance in Philadelphia, the cartoon advertises a current issue of *Annoying Performance Art* with such articles as: "What's so bad about bathing in tartar sauce? a panel discussion"; "More Leftover Yam Recipes"; "How to perform for the same people year after year after year."[10]

With nearly one full step into the nineties, whether more or less esoteric, performance art is no longer an isolated phenomenon rendered by a small group of dissident artists. Postmodern performance has achieved a commonplaceness in our mediated world. In that dialogue, Auslander suggests, "lies the possibility for a critical perspective on the culture of flow."[11]

The practical and theoretical work in this issue of *JDTC* represents the multifaced definition of the genre. Common themes emerge from the mixture. Rather than breaking ground in new directions, the work embodies sure footing and pregnant effort. The performance work of recent years exemplified by the included samples demonstrates a unifying flow within a structure of discontinuous images. The artists collected to perform in these pages are good at juggling many balls. Renaissance men and women, they write, direct, perform, produce and document their work. They perform their theory and can articulate their theoretical premises inside and outside their performance collages. Xerxes Mehta's descriptive and evaluative procedures involve a wide field of vision which encompasses all aspects of the production, including the artist's view of the working process. This is not, he emphasizes, a logocentric genre. It demands a critical approach which engages the whole body in the perception and criticism of the performance. Poet/performance artist/scholar Jon Erickson provides an historical perspective of body-centered modern performance. Erickson's own performance work and writing and that of Allard, Betina, Shimomura and Meyers, indicate a fascination with the language of the body. In Chuck Berg's interview, Philip Glass echoes the politically conscious, out-reaching work of Lacy and Burnham in collaborative artistic ventures and multicultural performances and performance contexts.

In the question and answer period of her Contemporary Music Symposium talk, Laurie Anderson clearly stated that she no longer considered herself an artist but a "thinly disguised moralist." The artists performing here, likewise, personalize their politics, incorporating private and public history in their art. They join with Anderson in voicing a desire to help create a better world through their work.

In 1989, beginning at the opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, Ulay and his performance partner Marina Abramović performed and documented their year-long walk towards each other. Following their East-West meeting in early 1990, Ulay reflected,

> I hope that those from the East will bring a new aesthetic and ethical values to the West; after all aesthetics without ethics are cosmetics. While Europe is about to face ethical issues within its restructuring and integrations between East and West, what is going on simultaneously in the U. S.? As far as I can tell, "post-modernism" has pushed things to a peak. That peak, if one can call it such, is the end of the quality judgement excepting one: money. Aside from that it seems that "new ethics" are being imposed by means of censorship upon the arts. Is that all about American puritanism, or is it the end of a dream?[12]

Performance art and its artists continue to ask questions which stretch the boundaries of perception, to celebrate multiple views of the world. Perhaps this is the most significant legacy of the work in its theory and practice. This supplement is dedicated to freedom of thought and expression everywhere--with the hope that it will help keep the dream alive.

Lawrence, Kansas

Notes

1. Laurie Anderson drew 2,636 to the University of Kansas Hoch Auditorium on April 18, 1990, a tall figure for a performance art audience, though dwarfed by the 50,000 who witnessed Paul McCartney in Ames, Iowa on July 18, 1990.

2. Linda Frye Burnham, "*High Performance*, Performance Art and Me," *The Drama Review*, 30:1 (Spring 1986, T109): 15.

3. L. A.-based *High Performance* magazine, founded by Linda Frye Burnham in 1976 continues to provide an international forum for documentation and discussion primarily by and for artists.

4. "Rejected Artists Plan Appeal," *Washington Post* (July 21, 1990).

5. "NEA and Artists: The Rift Widens," *Washington Post* (August 6, 1990) B3.

6. Richard Schechner, "The End of Humanism," *Performing Arts Journal*, 10/11:1/2, 15.

7. Peter Frank, "Performance Art in New York," *Performing Arts Journal*, 10/11:1/2, 125-26.

8. Richard Schechner, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde," *Performing Arts Journal*, 14:2, 18.

9. Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow: Performance Art and Mass Culture," *The Drama Review* 33:2 (Summer 1983, T122): 132.

10. Matt Groening, cartoon, *Philadelphia City Paper* (April 13-22, 1990) 31. In August 1990, in newspapers across the country, Doonesbury's J. J. wrestled with the "horns" of the NEA controversy. Cartoonist Trudeau experienced censorship first hand as papers in Columbus, Indiana and Fort Worth, Texas bleeped the comic strip out of print.

11. Auslander 132.

12. Ulay, "Current Agenda," *Yellow Springs Review* 4:1 (Spring 1990): 10.

From *Excerpts: THIRD HAND*. Performance collage by Marsha Paludan and Chorus. Photo by Gary Mackender.