

Performance Art: Problems of Description and Evaluation

Xerxes Mehta

These fragments have I shored
against my ruins.

Giorgio de Chirico

Today I would like to discuss with you a style of theatre known by various names: Theatre of Images, Performance Art, or simply Performance.¹ Because it is a relatively recent phenomenon, still outside the mainstream of theatre, and because it is significantly different from that mainstream, Performance Art presents problems of description and evaluation that critics are trying to solve on both sides of the Atlantic. In this essay I will outline a few of these problems and suggest certain approaches to them, sometimes directly, but more often implicitly, through an analysis of the style as I understand it.² Although my argument here is theoretical, readers who wish to pursue the workings of these issues through actual performances may consult a growing list of publications that take Performance Art seriously.³ To provide a context for the discussion, I should say that my sense of the style is derived from the work of the following artists: Ping Chong, Spalding Gray, Elizabeth LeCompte, Martha Clark, Lee Breuer, JoAnne Akalaitis, Adri Boon, and, to a lesser extent, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Meredith Monk. All of these people are not necessarily, or even primarily, performance artists, but all have worked in the vein of the style and all share many of its assumptions. It is hardly necessary to add that each artist is unique in temperament and purpose, that the differences among their works are at least as significant as the similarities, and therefore that the view offered here is neither a norm nor

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a prescription, but rather simply one approach to a form that is itself constantly evolving. I would now like to focus on the following issues: problems of description; perceptions of the performer; imagery; collage; subject and tone; and, in conclusion, the modernist roots of the style.

Problems of Description

I trust that the major challenges in writing about Performance will become clear in the ensuing analysis of elements of the style. However, before examining issues in detail, I would like to touch on a problem of description that has less to do with the critic's relationship to the work than it has to do with his relationship to his reader.

One usually cannot read the script of a Performance Art work. There is often no published script, and even on those rare occasions when a working script is printed (as in the recent cases of Breuer, Akalaitis, and Foreman), it is not widely available and, in any event, is of limited value in penetrating to the work's non-verbal core. An implication of this situation is that the reader is at the mercy of the critic, dependent on him not only for an analysis and evaluation of the work but also for the description upon which his judgments are based. The writing of the description challenges the critic both technically and ethically. It challenges him ethically in the sense that he is obliged to separate his opinions about the work from his description of it, obliged in his description to give the artist the benefit of every doubt, and to lay down as fair a basis as possible for the reader's *independent* evaluation of the work, against which the justice of the ensuing analysis can be weighed. When such an obligation is refused, the critic and his subject merge, leaving the reader with an indivisible mixture of impression and opinion.⁴ When it is accepted, the critic undertakes a schizophrenic enterprise which, while in my view right and necessary, will ultimately be undermined by the style itself. For there is a powerful surrealist impulse in the work which cancels distance, seducing the spectator into private landscapes of dream and desire. Such losses of perspective themselves become the subject of analysis *within* individual pieces, but by their nature are not transferable to the reader. Therefore, at a basic level, there is failure built into all writing about Performance, failure which should be acknowledged in the writing for it itself illuminates the style.

The writing of the description also challenges the scholar technically. The life of the style lies in its images--physical, sonic, and verbal images. A successful description must, therefore, not only lay down all three tracks in parallel, it must transmute two of them--sound and visuals--into language. This, of course, is not a new problem. It affects the criticism of any kind of theatre and, in our time, has itself become a focus of attention. I would suggest, however, that the dilemma is particularly sharp in the case of Performance, for the following reason. When a critic writes about a production of a published play, the reader has a verbal context into which to

place the description of the non-verbal elements. She can grasp the power of a cry, a song, a move, a color, by the way the described element dovetails into her core knowledge of the work. To use an analogy from classical painting, she can infer the nature of the space she cannot see from the nature of the space that she can, because a fixed and known perspective controls both. In Performance Art, on the other hand, as in most modernist art, there is no fixed perspective. Not only is there no controlling verbal hologram, both metaphorically and literally space is a-focal and the picture plane is flat. To quote Jean Clair, who is speaking here about Magritte's painting, *The Human Condition I*, "we are never certain as to the nature of that which remains hidden; the part that is veiled can differ from that which is visible" This uncertainty about the stability of the phenomenal world is, I suggest, a prime source for both the excitement and the anxiety one feels while watching a work of Performance Art. To the ancient treachery of translating sound and sight into words is added the newborn treachery practiced by the unknown upon the known. The critic is thus faced with having to describe all that he sees and hears not only vividly and completely, but in such a way that the shock of the unpredictable is preserved, with each stimulus offered to the reader in its material purity--self-sufficient, non-contextual, and independent of anything that precedes, follows, or accompanies it. The implications of such imagery I shall return to; for the moment it is enough to see that describing a work of Performance is both technically and ethically a great challenge. When the challenge is met, a door is opened onto the nature of the style.

Perceptions of the Performer

The presence of performers rather than actors is generally thought to be the single most decisive element separating Performance Art from theatre. Performers are themselves, exist in real time, and perform or "do" the various tasks or activities that the piece requires. Actors impersonate others, exist in stage time, and respond to their characters' inner psychological promptings. While the separation is not absolute (performers often demonstrate character types in Brechtian fashion and sometimes also act illusionistically in even the most abstract pieces), I think that on the whole the distinction is valid.

Because the shifts from performing to acting are so sudden and unpredictable, and because the whole notion of the performer's abstraction is so problematic, it might be helpful to the critic trying to deal with this aspect of the style to have some sense of why artists are driven to treat performers in the ways that they do. Here are some possible motives for the anti-illusionistic enterprise. First, there is a distrust of representation, stemming partly from embarrassment at the debased psychologisms of much realistic theatre, with its sentimentality, its unitary view of personality, its neat solutions and lack of mystery; and partly from a disgust at character emotion--"you know, the mouth drawn down to show sorrow and the tear trembling in the

eye⁶--that is part of a visual arts tradition at least as old as Duchamp and the Dadaists. The critic will note perhaps that this first motive, in its parricidal hatred of its parent form and its radical hostility toward the boulevard, the bourgeoisie, and "entertainment" in general, is firmly in the avant-garde mainstream of revolutionary modernism.

Another motive for the anti-illusionistic use of the performer is to decenter the spectator's experience. In traditional theatre, dialogue, character, and action conspire to guide the spectator's empathetic response. The ideal here would have the audience breathing, weeping, and rejoicing as one. Performance artists call this "the fascism of the center" and disavow it without exception. In their works, the performer is expressionless, mysterious, opaque, resistant to penetration and interpretation. The spectator, undirected, uncoerced, decentered, is thrown back upon himself, and so responds privately and subjectively, creating personal dreams and mythologies to interact with the dreams and mythologies laid out before him. The critic should note here that the performer with his face-as-still-life, while clearly influenced by Brechtian practice, produces a quite different effect. The Brechtian actor's distance from his character inhibits empathy and invites judgment; but the character himself, however delimited by his social function, is a clear and vital creation. Brecht's model of character, in its determinism, personal integrity, and rational consistency, is pre-modern, classical in fact. In Performance, on the other hand, the whole notion of "character" is problematic. The idea of a coherent personality developing consistently through time is regarded as a cruel joke. A performer may sketch out a social type inside an image and then vanish mid-sentence into another image, in which he might appear as a formal element, another social type, or simply "himself" doing a task in real time. Such displacements have the curious effect of reversing Brecht's pattern of empathy and judgement. As the images invade our dreams and the pressure of the collage grows, we generate interior contexts into which we place the living beings before us. We resubjectify the objectified performer, with the result that the more opaque the performer's face the more intensely do we project feelings upon him. The fact that he does not confirm or validate those feelings (as would a conventionally realistic actor) prevents our releasing them, forcing us to endow the following image, and the developing collage, with an ever-tightening interior tension. Distance, in short, increases empathy, while swamping judgment.⁷

A third motive for abstraction in performance is to enable the performer to become an object in a formal design. The artist here uses the performer much as a painter uses motifs on a canvas. The desire for this type of abstraction, which is at least as old as Schlemmer's experiments at the Bauhaus, is reflected in the prominence of dancers in the work; in the use of masks, puppets, and puppet-like people; and in the frequent execution of tasks or "found" movements by the performers. Because the average spectator is least accustomed to, and therefore most struck by, this type of performance

abstraction in a theatre context, and because many performance artists have extraordinary visual imaginations, criticism is pulled to respond to the work as "performing art," pure design. When it does so, it runs into a *cul de sac*. For just as the dance critic clings to the human realities underpinning the dancer's thrust toward ideal form (realities often only subliminally present in the work), so too does the critic of Performance have to keep in mind that attempt is not achievement, that human beings on stage can never become pure abstractions. A consequence of this tension between object and subject is that our perception of the performer is at least double and more usually multiple. As we sense the growing rifts between the performer and the abstractions which enclose him, and between the performer and his own attempted abstraction, we suspend ourselves in an evaluative paradox, delighting in the abstract enterprise even as we delight in its failure.⁸

Imagery

Because the flow of images in a Performance Art piece is often so seamless, critics are occasionally seduced into appreciations of the surface of the work. This is understandable since the sensuous surface, the shimmering skin, is of great importance and central to the work's impact. What is sometimes missed, however, is the underlying purpose of the style, which is not sensuous, but, rather, formal and analytic. If I think about the scenery for the works that I have seen, I come across blanks--bare floors, white screens, wall-to-wall scrims, all-white sets. Each in its own way is a *tabula rasa*, a machine to clean the palette, and what is performed on the machine is an act of analysis. Conducting the analysis are two types of images--images incorporated directly from life or art and images created by the performance artist, "found" images and made images, images of fact and of desire. The proportion of each varies by artist, but both are necessary to balance exterior and interior worlds within the work. The neat separation that this implies is of course illusory, part of the fascination of the work lying in sudden fusions of realms--for example, a live performer in black tie inside a filmed sardine can, speaking words; behind the man, also inside the can, filmed white clouds drifting through a blue sky; coming out of the man's mouth the voice of the writer, Padraic Colum, reading from his *Irish Tales*. This is the last scene from Adri Boon's *Perfidia*.

The incorporation of images from life traces its lineage back through Pop Art, Happenings, John Cage, and Duchamp to the cubist and Dada assemblages of the early century. Such images rely upon the common association for their "found" meaning. Despite the disorientation we experience when we encounter them in the context of the art work, such images never entirely lose their primary appeal, their thrill of recognition, their associations from our lives. Through them, therefore, the artist gains instant access to the collective unconscious, which he can then manipulate.

The created image, on the other hand, is almost always surreal. Suddenly changing scale, sliding across periods and cultures, joining fact and desire, fascinating, mysterious, and opaque, it exactly complements the discontinuity, fascination, mystery, and opaque surface of the photographic world view. If one accepts, with Susan Sontag, that "The arts in which Surrealism has come into its own are prose fiction . . . theatre, the arts of assemblage, and--most triumphantly--photography,"⁹ then Performance Art, which incorporates all of these, is the surreal art for a surreal time.

That said, the question of evaluation once again arises and again presents a thicket of problems. Two possible approaches suggest themselves: first, does the imagery realize the artist's purpose?; and second, does the imagery, independent of intention, stir fresh thought and feeling in the viewer? If the answer to the first question is yes, and to the second is no, the critic is often tempted to extrapolate his judgment of the individual artist to a dismissal of the style as a whole. To explore the first approach, the internal evaluation, the critic must have a sense of what the creator's purpose is. Interviews can help here, although artists are notoriously shy about verbalizing their sources of energy. Repeated viewings of the work, and of other works by the same artist, are more useful, even when, perhaps especially when, they contradict the interview. Consequently, in tentatively offering the following criteria for image selection, I ask that the reader once again keep in mind the limited value of such generalizations, given the variety of artists and privacy of purposes discernible in this most catholic of styles.

The performance artist seems to be drawn toward those images which, first of all, will seduce us out of our quotidian realities into a parallel world of dreams and the subconscious, and secondly, will intensify our receptive faculties by shaking us out of perceptual ruts. The first criterion is Romantic, the second is didactic, and both are modernist. Further, the first can accomplish the purposes of the second, and the reverse. Guided by these controlling criteria, the choice of quoted imagery, as suggested earlier, is governed by the need to gain entry to the collective unconscious of the audience. Such images can range from the crude wit and vigor of commercial signs--breasts, buttocks, bombs, lipsticks, stop signs, go signs, neon numbers, beautiful clothes, beautiful cars, beautiful people, etc. (Boon); to the absurd and mythic bravery of Scott's final diary entry from the Antarctic (Akalaits); to the artist's childhood home, the pure, white, New England frame house that has always claimed a corner of the American soul (Gray and LeCompte); to a lovely old nineteenth century steam engine, complete with cowcatcher (Wilson). In every case, the image owes its power to the fact that it is brought into the work whole, unmediated by art except for the technology of transfer. Art releases its beauty, but does not create it. The image feels fresh, unexpected, stumbled upon, and is displayed with an intensity of focus that subverts our sense of reality, making us feel that we have never seen or heard it before although we know that we have. Fairly clear in all of this is the cult

of the surrealist object and, with it, the surrealist project of finding "the marvelous in the ordinary." Also clear, parenthetically, is the degree to which our visual and aural memories have come to be dominated by the camera and the tape recorder.

The choice of the created image, on the other hand, appears to be controlled by the artist's need to manipulate the associations that the found image has evoked. If the found image is aural, the created might be visual, or the reverse; if the found is photographic, the created might use performers, and so on. However media are opposed, the artist uses the created image to color the quotation, to impose upon it his own burden of irony, history, melancholy, fear, loathing, nostalgia, or delight. In this way the artist simultaneously makes love to and takes revenge upon the world, and, by returning our innocently proffered associations to us in altered form, invites us to do the same. In much of the work, the made imagery possesses a compulsive, childlike quality, reminiscent of a Magritte or a Rousseau, and exists on that flat, clear, surrealist space where the sewing machine met the operating table. In the process, the stage, much like a modernist painting, becomes a material object, of interest in itself, rather than simply a window onto an imagined reality.

These are a few of the image-related purposes of the performance artist and the critic may enter a work through the openings they provide. The questions he asks might include some of the following. Since the image's ability to suspend time is its primary appeal to the artist, does it succeed in doing so? Does the image lift him, the critic, out of the mundane while still retaining sufficient objective reality to break free of the artist's own circle of subjectivity? Do the images gain in concentration and intensity as the pressure of the collage grows? Do the images propel the style's vast movements of theme and mood without falling into either narrative literalness or arid point-making? Does the created image match the ready-made in power, resonance, and felt rightness? Does the artist's skill of handling succeed in turning an icon from life into an icon in art? What is the quality of the irony evoked by the dialectic between found image and made, judgment sliding on a scale between the reductively facile at one end to mature and passionate insight on the other? In asking these or other similar questions, it is essential, in my view, that the critic not be disturbed by the fact that such judgments are inherently subjective. They spring from his temperament, personal history, and intuitive relationship to the phenomenal world. They cannot be systematized or validated. Consequently, they expose the critic in a quite personal way and ask from him a professional bravery that was once not uncommon in the writing about art--one thinks of a Berenson or a Rosenberg, or a Barr--but that the jargon-ridden "discourses" of our time render in short supply.

Collage

The style offers two levels of collage. The first, already touched on, is the collage within the image, which constitutes the image. The second level is between images. In either case, the method, which attempts to capture a multitude of perspectives in a moment of simultaneous apprehension, is inherently cubist, recalling cubist collages, surrealist collages, assemblages, and Happenings (collage with people, in real time). In the earlier example from *Perfidia* the sardine can, the sky and clouds, and the Irish writer's calm, lyrical reading from his work were the found elements, in themselves merely facts, but carrying the associations of our prior encounters with them in life. The created element was the expressionless performer in the tuxedo, seen here for the first time. Also seen freshly was the collage, the startling arrangement of all the elements. The cumulative effect evoked, simultaneously, laughter, wonder at the variousness of the world, awe at the technical accomplishment, and, dominantly, a bitter-sweet longing for an Eden that was once our birthright and that our stupidity and violence had destroyed forever. These responses were not the property of individual elements but rather the outcome of their collision. It is also worth stressing that the experience is not exclusively intellectual, not the assimilating of a point or idea, but rather is inclusively emotional. Freed to respond however one wishes, all feelings, thoughts, and possibilities are somehow held in suspension within oneself, even as one surrenders to the gorgeously sensuous and tactile surface of the work.

In this way, broken raw materials are assembled in broken stagings that refuse beginnings and endings, stop or start in mid-sentence, and cut without inflection between media and from scene to scene. Constituting the collage are collisions of media--performers vs. puppets vs. text, film, video, slides, set, lights, props, costumes, and live, miked, and recorded sound; of cultures--for example, Victorian vs. Modern, Eastern vs. Western, Scientific vs. Spiritual, Romantic vs. Ironic, Male vs. Female, "primitive" vs. "developed"; of rhythm and texture--for example, movement vs. stillness, color vs. black and white, words or sound vs. silence, three dimensional stimuli vs. two dimensional, hard, satiric images vs. ambiguous, surrealist invitations, tightly controlled set pieces vs. wild, primal releases; and of eye and ear--for example, quoted words distorted through prisms of critical or contrasting visuals, and/or the reverse. Obviously, such a list is merely an inventory of theatrical means, no different from the resources available to and used by traditional theatre. Which suggests that, as far as collage is concerned, the critical difference between the parent style and its rebellious offspring lies not so much in what is there as in what is not there. By removing all linear overlays, such as word-and-character-centered through lines, Performance rescues theatre's inherent collage structure from its enervating role of emotional handmaiden to an imagined reality. Released to reclaim its truthfulness, and its materiality, the collage reemerges as startling, difficult, brilliant. In the process, Performance,

by stripping a central aspect of theatre to its essentials, its formal core, reaffirms two central aspects of the modernist quest--to find that which is irreducible in a medium; and to force us to look at art as art and not life.

Which returns us to the question of perception and, more specifically, to the war between conscious and subconscious responses to the style. The critic will note that while cubist contrasts sting the intellect at the moment of impact, their passage through the glitter of many media cancels distance and reimposes the Surrealism also inherent in collage. This surrealist quality is further intensified by the primary eroticism of the factual world imported from life, and by the secondary eroticism generated as social sign is transmuted into artistic image, fact transformed into desire. The influence of Pop Art here, with its appropriations from life and art and its artificial remythologizing of popular myth, is obvious. One might say then that the central consequence of using collage as structure is the creating of a performance style that is simultaneously analytic, from its cubist bones, and dreamlike, from its surrealist skin.

While the tradition of modernist art criticism can offer sophisticated models to the critic writing about collage in Performance, the writer eventually faces a pair of contradictions not found in painting. The first stems from the fact that the collage is alive, moves through time, and so remains in tension with the simultaneity of impact that is its own essence. One consequence of using a structural device from a fixed art in a time art is the viewer's feeling that time has stopped. All that takes place seems to occur in a kind of arrested present. Denied the comfort of forward motion, and therefore of anticipated release, the viewer fixates on the image before him, seeing in it the whole work in microcosm. The image that follows is thus experienced as a near-repeat of the first, differing only in the way that it textures, colors, or weights its neighbor. Cumulatively, one feels an ever increasing pressure on mind and heart.

The other collage-related contradiction not found in painting is introduced by the use of words. Whatever the nature of the text in a work, whether quoted or created, whether wielded as sound or as thought, its use introduces the issue of meaning, and, relatedly, introduces a tension between the comparative singularity and transparency of commonly held verbal meaning and the inherent plurality and opacity of the meaning of the image. This tension, which is irresolvable, anchors the work between objective and subjective worlds, much in the manner of the tension between found imagery and made. The critic thus once again finds himself in an ambiguous relationship to the work, trapped between the art critic's sensuous and open-ended response to visual stimuli and the fiction critic's need to penetrate the deep structure of an ordered, and presumably controlling, verbal pattern. Because the raw material of that pattern, language, is the same as that used in the critical endeavor, the critic's logocentric leanings often favor the verbal element in the style, endowing it with a residual content and an over-arching

symbolic dimension quite foreign both to the nature of collage and to modernism's play of surfaces. The immediate result, of course, is a distortion of the work. In the wider perspective, an opportunity is missed to begin to correct, in however modest a way, an identical distortion in most writing about theatre. For I suggest once again that by subtracting every element that contributes to the mirage of unitary verbal meaning, including especially the published script, Performance Art's whiplash uncovers the bedrock of discontinuous sensory structure that anchors all multi-media time arts, of which theatre is the paradigm.

Subject and Tone

At a time of continuing and extreme self-consciousness in art, art is its own subject in every Performance work that I have seen. This tendency derives, I suspect, partly from the obsession with perception that is endemic to modernism; partly from century-old assumptions that reality is multiple and objective truth unknowable; partly from the recent influence of formalist painters like Rauschenberg, Johns, and Stella; and partly, perhaps, from the simple exhilaration of breaking new ground. Such contributing factors, and possibly others as well, coalesce into certain formal determinations that are shared to a greater or lesser extent by all the artists I have mentioned.

First of all, there is the determination to break free from the circumscribed personal concerns of the individual playwright and admit the world directly into the work. As the dialectic between the reality outside the frame and the complex meditation on theatrical form within the frame proceeds, the apparent subject of the work is overwhelmed by the real subject of the style, which is the nature of perception. In short, art becomes its own subject. This is a particularly difficult area for criticism, for the temptation is strong to see the work as being about what it appears to be about, or, alternately, to see it as an inherently formal investigation. Of course it is both, the interaction between the two subjects--of the work and of the style--being one of the most fascinating areas in the writing about Performance.

Secondly, there is the determination to welcome the world into art in the way in which we experience the world in life, that is, in fragments, uncensored by form, unmediated by meaning. The style thus becomes a report on multiple meanings, echoing within the frame a world of shifting relationships that includes the onlooker. In place of the front and center focus of the traditional stage box-picture, with the onlooker clearly outside the frame and perspectively in control of it, there is the flattened space and all-over emphasis that denies perspective and decenters viewing. The onlooker is sucked into the work. Deprived of the means to "understand" in the classical sense, he enters a modernist aesthetic wholeheartedly. At the same time, his developing awareness that how he perceives is as germane as what he perceives restores that peculiar type of perspective that our century has accustomed us to, a kind

of distance *in medias res*. Parenthetically, this development in theatre parallels similar decentralizations in painting--begun by the Impressionists and completed by the Abstract Expressionists--and in dance--begun by Nijinsky and realized by Merce Cunningham.¹⁰ Just as *The New Yorker's* dance critic responded to a Cunningham piece by describing it as "fragments of a puzzle which I had only begun to put together when the season ended . . . in memory,"¹¹ so too the recollection of a Performance Art work in memory is an experience of a different order from that of viewing it. Which of the two experiences is the more authentic, and whether the unity found in recollection is real or spurious are open questions.

A third formal determination of the performance artist is to free theatre from the technical habits of traditional practice, habits which, in the opinion of these creators, have congealed into prejudices. Just as the early modernists freed painting and sculpture from the restrictive belief that only certain materials--oil and stone--were appropriate for creation in those arts, expressing themselves through anything that came to hand, so too do performance artists radically alter the technique of the stage. In rejecting fictional dialogue, narrative, illusion, and perspective, and in admitting in a wholesale way the mass technology of reproduction--photography, film, recorded sounds, voices, and words--into a traditionally hand-made form, they balance the loss of certain powers with the gain of others. Among the losses is theatre's abiding achievement, the ability to trace the fine movements of a single soul. Among the gains is the ability to evoke an extraordinarily rich range of feeling and thought through the creation of analytical dreamscapes stuffed with the artifacts of our age and of our imaginations.

In all of these ways is art itself the subject of Performance. Such a formal enterprise, however, eventually runs into a contradiction. Resisting abstraction and fighting solipsism is the fact that the bits of the world on the stage, including the live performer, demand coextensive relations with the world. The formal enterprise demands grist for its mill. Non-formal subjects thus reenter the work, their specifics varying from piece to piece. What they have in common is the dialectic between the imported world of fact and the attitude that the artist takes toward that world. This attitude usually consists of a mixture of two contradictory feelings, their proportions depending on the individual creator. On the one hand, there is a love for and a celebration of the physical world, both nature and the works of man. On the other hand, there is an awareness of the evil in human nature and the sadness of the human condition. This tension, which controls the attitude to the material, which in turn controls all the made elements in the piece, gives the style its major tonality. If pressed to characterize this tonality, which again varies by artist, I would describe it as a kind of clear-eyed Utopianism, a dazzlingly witty and ironic melancholy.

While the critic may trace this dominant tone back through a particular *oeuvre* to its buried sources in an artist's temperament, history, and aesthetic,

I suggest that there is a sense in which the source of the feeling is the style itself. Here again is Sontag on the photograph: "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."¹² What Sontag says about the photograph could be extended to recorded voices, sounds, and words, and to their arrangement in a collage, which, precisely by interrupting the flow of time and freezing selected moments of it, turns present into past.

Performance and Modernism

Because Performance Art has been defined so variously, encompassing everything from a conceptual gesture by a solo performer to the complex company pieces at issue here, much of what I have said about the style so far could be seen differently; and that would be to the good, for modernist art's periodic eruptions have always fed on controversy. What I hope this essay has contributed to, however, is the beginning of a discussion about the critical attitudes needed to enter the fray. If, in brief summary, I might now move out of the implicit mode into an explicit one, I would say that the critic of Performance Art must first describe the work. The description and the subsequent or accompanying analysis should focus on imagery and, like the work of an art, music or poetry critic, should come as close to capturing the image as the limitations of language permit. Like his colleagues in film, the critic of Performance should be alive to the collisions of images, imbuing his work with the editor's sensibility. Like the critic of culture; he should be able to recognize found images and understand their power in their native contexts—both high culture and popular culture. Like the dance or music critic, he should feel at home in real time schemes, wherein the only reality is the reality here and now, in the space shared by all. Finally, and in my view most centrally, he should understand in intimate terms the great modernist adventure of the past century and a half. For Performance Art is profoundly indebted to the modernist tradition.

This indebtedness runs much deeper than a simple absorption by Performance of certain techniques and tendencies from early modern painting. Through their generational revolt against theatre, their parent art, through their subjectivism, and through their analytically formal concerns, performance artists join the great modernist quest, the quest for the only truthful relationship between human beings and their representation of themselves in art, that, in these artists' opinion, is possible at a given time in history. Looked at in this way, the style's obsession with perception is neither an act of narcissism nor an act of solipsism. Rather, it can be seen as an ethical act, a bridge backward to certain modernist intuitions about the nature of life. Such intuitions would include, among others, the notions that, in Flaubert's words, art should be

about "nothing but itself"; that perception is art's central subject; that perception is plural, life is multiple and reality insubstantial; that no end perspective on experience is possible and that therefore episodic structure, discontinuity, and shock are important organizing principles; that coherent growth through time--of personality or art work--is illusory, and that therefore both are to be apprehended in a single, simultaneously perceived image or image cluster; and that the only reality that feels real is the reality we invent, and that therefore works must reflect and redeem the contingency of life through an art of paradox and ironic design.

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Notes

1. This article is a slightly altered version of a paper delivered at the XI World Congress of the International Federation for Theatre Research, Stockholm, Sweden, May 29-June 4, 1989.

2. Portions of this article are drawn from my earlier writings on the subject: "Some Versions of Performance Art," *Theatre Journal* 36 (May 1984): 164-198; and "Notes From the Avant-Garde," *Theatre Journal* 31 (March 1979): 5-24.

3. I have found the following sources to be particularly useful: *boundary 2*, *October*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *New Performance*, *The Drama Review*, *Theater*, *The Soho Weekly News*, and *The Village Voice*.

4. To avoid such a pitfall, one journal editor forbade his contributors to include any opinion at all, on the theory that a rigorously observed record of the work would speak for itself. This disingenuous bit of scientific Utopianism, in positing a quasi-scientific objectivity and a pseudo-scientific methodology in the response to art, not only reduced every event to tedious and indistinguishable lists of sight and sound, but also robbed this most elusive of styles of its *raison d'être*--the evocation of private states of feeling and association in the viewer. The fact that the critic's response can not be duplicated by the person to his left, not to mention his reader, is precisely what renders the response revelatory.

5. Jean Clair, "Seven Prolegomenae to a Brief Treatise on Magrittian Tropes," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 103.

6. Robert Rauschenberg, cited in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 236.

7. The critic may wish to speculate on my suggestion that the spectator's empathy, in the sense in which I have described it, is ultimately for the spectator himself, rather than for the character, or even the performer. As at funerals, wherein the dead neither accept nor reject, we grieve for ourselves.

8. The type of multiple vision under discussion here is not the same as the normal separation of actor from role that the theatre critic is trained to detect. Even the halls of mirrors found in *As You Like It*, *Six Characters . . .*, or *The Balcony*, while undermining the stability of human identity in complex and various ways, do not question the actor's basic subjecthood.

9. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 47.

10. Arlene Croce, "Crises," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 1989, 106.

11. Croce 107.

12. Sontag 14.

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