

The subject of the narrative is the subject: the analogous formation of our own identity through processes of perception and identification.

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#### Six Performance

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#### Kristine Stiles

Performance has mandated the most comprehensive discussion of the identity, purpose, and value of the plastic arts since the Renaissance. Yet, while nearly every avant-garde since the end of the nineteenth century has included some form of presentational art, a sweeping reconsideration of Western aesthetics has not yet emerged. Why has it been so difficult to accept and theorize performance as a critical term of art history? To begin, in performance the artwork is an artist, an animate subject rather than an inanimate object, whom viewers see as both the subject and the object of the work of art. Performance, unlike conventional art, asserts embodiment and interconnection in time, space, and place as the basis of human experience, perception, and representation; and "repraesentatio," as David Summers has pointed out, "is a construction around the verb 'to be'" (p. 6 in this volume). Performance operates through representation and presentation, and therefore may be understood as an aesthetic discourse on what it means "to be." In performance, artists present and represent themselves in the process of *being and doing*, and these acts take place in a cultural context for a public to witness.

Performance has also resisted traditional art-historical methods of analysis by appending the associational connection of metonymy to the conventional metaphorical means of representation. This is achieved through somatic identification between acting and viewing subjects, supplementing the subject/object opposition of established art with a subject-to-subject encounter (Stiles 1987, 30; Phelan 1993, 150). Performance thus modifies the fixed relation between subjects and objects and between exhibition and reception by interjecting into an aesthetic frame performing and viewing subjects capable of both fluid action and interaction. In this way performance art has also complicated Hegelian, Marxist, and psychoanalytic notions of the intrinsic alienation of the subject/object dyad. The result is a radical injunction to transfer aesthetic discourse from objects to human subjects, to express corporeal conditions in their psychological

and cultural contexts, and to create an interactive visual model of human social and political agency.

Ironically, the emphasis of performance on subjectivity and intersubjectivity coincided with the deconstruction of biography as an art-historical method and of originality as the basis of art. Performance challenges and undermines the displacement of the artist by poststructuralist theory, calling attention to the artists who perform creative acts, their imaginative processes and existential conditions, and their relation to public events and sociopolitical conditions. Performance thus reforms the very terms of aesthetic encounter, illuminating the foundational relationships among presentation, representation, and reception in the formation of artistic meaning. In these ways, performance affirms the inextricable interrelationship between private, biographical experiences and public, social practices in the production of art. It raises the ethical and political stakes of aesthetic engagement by positioning artists as a cultural force in and for social change.

Calling into question the canons of Western art history, performance by artists has also made critical contributions to the philosophical and political understanding of the function and efficacy of art. First, artists deployed their bodies as the primary means of signification for communicating visual concepts, challenging aesthetic protocols as to what might constitute the proper objects and subjects of visual art. This affronted deeply naturalized assumptions concerning the aesthetics of disinterest and the autonomy of art, and confounded any limited view that resolutely separates art from nature. Second, artists utilized their bodies in performance to engage more directly in cultural discourse, frequently disputing—in highly contentious forms and contexts—social and political conventions defining the proprieties, boundaries, limitations, and abilities traditionally ascribed to gender, sexuality, and race. Such performances had a demonstrable and immediate impact on the state and its laws and social practices, as well as on religious discourse and cultural relations in real time. Third, the metaphoric and metonymic signifying conditions of performance made visibly concrete the previously mysterious and hidden act of making. By representing the act of making as an enactment, performance established a dynamic and dialectical relation among the artist, the institutional context of culture and the arts, and the politics and authority of religion and the state. Performance explicitly manifests the interactive processes that are operative in the formation and shaping of society, and artists working in this medium exhibit the body as *the* vital social and political interface.

Such are the interlocking categories of performance that this essay elaborates. I will theorize that performance has constructed a *transpersonal visual aesthetic*, which functions as an *interstitial continuum* linking subjects to subjects through mutual identification. That recognition extends from agreement

to opposition, but seldom achieves resolution. The cultural operations of performance, I will also suggest, may be best grasped through the concept of *commisure*, a word that signifies the dual operations of linkage intrinsic to the site of juncture: 1) connection at a juncture, and 2) entrustment (delivery into another's charge). My discussion begins with an analysis of Jim Dine's *The Smiling Workman* (1960), a concise and provocative art work that exemplifies and poignantly complements what I shall have to say about performance.

I

I LOVE  
WHAT  
I'M DOING  
HELP

—Jim Dine, *The Smiling Workman* (1960)

Jim Dine entered the dark space where he would perform *The Smiling Workman* dressed in a floor-length red smock that was pulled up over his head "like a shroud." (Where I have quoted Dine, his remarks are from a conversation we had on 15 September 2000.) He walked as if in a trance, grumbling and mumbling, accompanied by a tape of his own mumbled words. He had painted both his face and his shaved head red, and in black he had painted high, arched eyebrows over his eyes and a smile that stretched beyond his mouth to his cheeks. "I wanted to appear like a deep bass note, very dramatic, not like Emmett Kelly [1898–1979, clown]; there was a great deal of intensity that was palpable." Dine approached the middle section of a three-part stage flat made of stretched canvas (about ten feet tall by six feet wide). In its central panel he had earlier painted a raw-edged, gestural semicircular white form, as if priming a canvas using broad expressive brush strokes (see Plate 6.1). Dine—who is left-handed—had also earlier dipped his left hand into the white paint and applied multiple prints of it to both the right and left sides of this painted white surface. In front of the flats, he had placed a table with three large pails filled with orange, blue, and red paint. Dine immediately grabbed the brushes and rapidly painted the words "I LOVE" in blue. Snatching another brush, he plunged it into the orange pigment and wrote "WHAT I'M." Quickly he picked up the pail of red paint and drank it. Then he hurried to paint in orange: "DOING HELP." Pouring the remaining paint over his head, Dine dove through his picture. The performance lasted approximately thirty-two seconds.

In *The Smiling Workman*, Dine's actions transcribed into language his psychological compulsion to produce images and his feeling of being "a prisoner of the urge to work." He translated his emotional investment (being in "love" with "what"—that intangible, transformative force of creativity—into a declaration

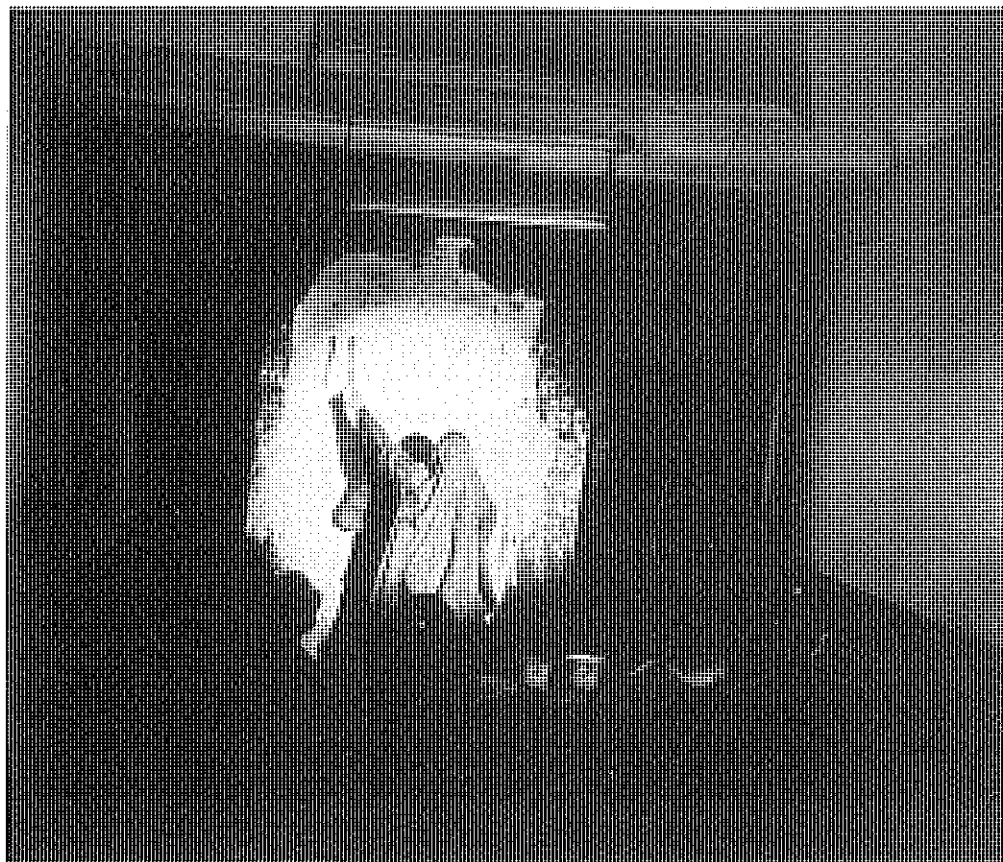


Plate 6.1

Jim Dine, *The Smiling Workman*, 1960. Photograph by Martha Holmes.

of "what I'm doing." He also externalized his internal urgency in delirious, visual movement and ingested the red, symbolically charged, paint of his passion. While his body could already be seen on the picture surface in the imprint of his left hand, Dine reinscribed the material of his obsession inside his body with red paint, and poured the orange and blue paint over himself. Paint and picture conjoined with Dine's body as a continuum of surfaces and receptacles. He transcoded tropes of the visual arts with those of the performing arts, and fused the visual economy and cultural logic of both in the spaces in front of, on, through, and behind the picture plane, as well as on, in, through, and over his body.

The painted mark remaining from Dine's left palm print signaled the materialization of an inner state and attitude of mind. It evinced human visual history of the hand as a manifestation both



Plate 6.2

Jim Dine, *The Smiling Workman*, 1960. Photograph by Martha Holmes.



Plate 6.3

Jim Dine, *The Smiling Workman*, 1960. Photograph by Martha Holmes.

of being and of action, a tool of doing ("I love what I'm doing"). Replete with human symbolism, the mark of his left hand suggests a number of associations: prehistoric graffiti that announces presence through and over time; the ego-establishing impressions made by a child (*l'art brut*); the palm as a map of destiny; and a ceremonial sign (for example, five fingers to denote the body composed of four extremities and a head). In particular, the left hand—governed by the right brain—is also a highly charged sign: in Muslim tradition it represents the unclean; in Taoism, the yang or male; as an alchemical sign, the unconscious, creative rather than the rational mind; in folk cultures, the awkward, sinister, oblique, and inauspicious. But in late February 1960, the mark of the hand specifically recalled the gestural signatures of Jackson Pollock's and Hans Hofmann's hands, imprimaturs left by the masters on their canvases, those fathers whose symbolic castration was necessary to make room for the son. Jim Dine jumped through the painting to establish the priority of his being on either side of its surface. In this way Dine's performance recalled that of Saburo Murakami of the Japanese Gutai group, who leapt through the canvas in 1955 in *At One Moment Opening Six Holes*, and even earlier that of Lucio Fontana, who in 1949 punched holes in the surface to reveal the space behind the canvas. "We were very ambitious," Dine recalled about producing happenings and marking the history of art with his hand and his body.

Intimate and universal, Dine's hand-marks held the "picture" within the parenthetical enclosure. This enclosure metaphorically referred to the framing devices of art and metonymically extended Dine's psychophysical frenzy of doing into that frame. In this gesture, he limited and controlled art within the context of his acts of "doing" in the past, present, and future. But the parenthesis formed by the print of his left hand on either side of the picture was not the regular ( ) parenthetical enclosing device, but rather a double open shape ( ( expanding the frame of art into the future where art exceeds its conventional framing apparatus. Dine's body became a place where object (the painting) and subject (the painter) met and functioned as the site of the transfer from the acting to the viewing subject. In this performance, Dine intuitively invoked the Kantian parergon (a composite of inside/outside that implies a "through") and the Lacanian scopic field, with its double viewing positions: from the gaze across the field of the image/screen to the subject of representation and back. More importantly, Dine signified and was the transit between binary positions, asserting the primacy of the body (and its phenomenological actions) over the constructions of language.

As an interstitial continuum, Dine's performance represented both the imperative to act—to do (as in the simultaneous presentation and construction of the painting)—and the past residue of that act—done (as in re-presentation, the

sign of completed action in the palm print). In his multiple manifestations of *doing*, Dine brought into play central problems of existence related to being-in-time that Henri Bergson identified at the core of metaphysics:

Existence appears to imply two conditions taken together: (1) presentation in consciousness and (2) the logical or causal connection of that which is so presented with what precedes and with what follows. The reality for us of a psychical state or of a material object consists in the double fact that our consciousness perceives them and that they form part of a series, temporal or spatial, of which the elements determine each other. (Bergson 1991, 147)

Portraying the extended states between being and things, Dine somatically materialized memory and mind in action. He framed various viewing positions and places of the body, and in thirty-two seconds expressed conditions of quality, quantity, relation to ends, and modalities of means, as well as individual and interpersonal necessity.

Dine did not enact a dissociated abstract entity, "the body." Neither did he become a disembodied "performing body." Rather, as a distinct personality, he animated the social space between people, the interstitial continuum across which all communication flows. Dine began this process by revealing the contingencies of the autobiographical I/eye (a position both Robert Morris, in *I-Box* [1962], and Carolee Schneemann, in *Eye Body* [1963], would soon explore in works based on photographic documentation of bodily actions). In visualizing the economies of the personal body, Dine portrayed the dynamic dialectic of the individual and the social body temporarily joined in the cultural institutions of art. Confirming that he was always already a specific person, man, and artist who paints, Dine also avowed how the individual is socially mediated and grounded in interpersonal need, an insufficiency signaled by the word "HELP." Simultaneously an autobiographical, existential state and a call for others' assistance, the word "HELP" requests responsibility and a modicum of commitment. "HELP" demands response across the social field where bodies act and interact. I theorize this interstitial continuum as a *commis-sure*.

According to *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, the word "commis-sure" is derived from the Latin *commis-sura*, a joining together or connection, and is "the place where two bodies or parts of one body meet and unite in a joint, seam, closure, cleft, juncture." In this sense, commissure refers both to "the corporeal slit separating both the eyelids and the lips" and to "the band of nerve tissue connecting corresponding parts of the right and left halves of the brain or spinal cord." Commissure is useful for thinking about the mutual recognition and possible interconnection between subjects suggested by the metonymic function of linkage in performance. The intersubjective identification that characterizes per-

formance parallels the slit between the eyelids and the lips that defines commissure. Thus, the commissure simultaneously stands for the artist who acts metaphorically *as if* s/he were the actual force of that connection and *as* the actual agent of that metonymical juncture. Commissure signifies the corporeal continuity between both the body and its objects, as well as the human interactions of the social body. Dine demonstrated all these functions when he visualized how art is a framing device for interactions between viewers and objects, now become subjects. His leap through the picture pointed to and was simultaneously the space/time/body/place of (a) a subject (maker) and a subject (viewer), (b) a subject (maker) and an object, (c) an object before and after being created and destroyed, and (d) a subject before, in the process of, and after an aesthetic act.

"Commissure" is also related to the term *committo* and its derivatives (e.g., *committere*, *commis*, *commis-sum*), meaning to unite, connect, entrust, to give in trust, or to perpetrate. I have introduced the term commissure as a means to describe a key structural feature of performance art: its operation as a connector. If we think of performance as a commissure—a kind of parenthesis within which connection occurs—then it becomes possible to grasp how performance metonymically stages and displays the interdependence of performing and viewing subjects. Moreover, as a commissure, performance visualizes the otherwise invisible covenant that takes place between doing and seeing others doing and seeing. Through its emphasis on exchange, performance offers a model for a transpersonal aesthetics of interconnectivity. That performative covenant must be recognized as the historical foundation for a host of new visual arts practices from installation to interactive multimedia. Performance may also be credited with forming the basis for the social adhesion through which many international artists' groups have bonded, from the Nouveaux Réalistes, Fluxus, and Arte Povera to CoLAB, Group Material, and the Guerrilla Girls.

Returning to *The Smiling Workman*, it could be said that Dine presented himself as a commissure, working between action (his performance) and its object (the action painting itself). His performance operated as a commissure between his enactment as a subject and viewers as witnessing subjects, announcing his social contingency *and* his personal need for communication and interpersonal relationship. This workingman drew attention to the psychophysical, cognitive, and intuitive mechanisms that produced the act and its object in all their dimensionality. In such ways, Dine's performance (and performance by artists in general) renders transparent and explicit the interpersonal responsibility demanded of visual forms. This capacity brings to mind W. J. T. Mitchell's provocative question, "What do pictures really want?" (Mitchell 1996). Perhaps the answer is the commissure, namely the responsible interconnection that art has always promised and that performance by artists has brought closer to its goal.

## II

We shall observe the appearance of the human figure as an event. . . . Each gesture and each movement is drawn into the sphere of significance.

—Oskar Schlemmer, *Bühne* (Stage) (1927)

The origins of performance are convoluted, contested, and context dependent. To further complicate its comprehensibility, the notion of performance is used in nonaesthetic discourse to discuss modes of behavior in humans, animals, machines, and systems. It is also operative conceptually across disciplines. Moreover, performance must be associated with all the performing arts (theater, dance, music, and poetry). The debt of performance to theater has been traced from ancient ritual to early modernism, the Renaissance, and the emergence of the *commedia dell'arte* to Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and the Living Theater in the twentieth century (Battcock and Nickas 1984; Schechner 1985). The impact of visual art performance on theater has also been significant and deserves more scholarly attention of the kind devoted to the relationship between performance and John Cage's philosophy and compositional techniques, and to the dancers associated with the Judson Church (Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, and others). Some kinds of performances—such as body art, by being primarily concentrated upon the phenomenology of bodily action and experience without recourse to language—differ from what Nelson Goodman has called the allographic arts, in which interpretive action is based upon a script or score (Goodman 1968). However, text-based performances have steadily increased since the late 1970s in direct proportion to the increase of identity politics as a thematic of performance.

During the 1960s, artists proposed many terms to describe their presentational forms of art, varying imaginatively from happenings and Fluxus to actions, events, ceremonies, demonstrations, situations, activities, body art, artists' theater, kinetic theater, and so forth. This multiplicity of terms should not be misunderstood as a resistance to definition. On the contrary, it is a testimony to the rich diversity of performance's manifestations and to the desire of artists to distinguish, by naming, particular styles and intentions. Only in the early 1970s did the generic term "performance" begin to be adopted widely, and even then amid serious doubts about its capacity to signify either the wide variety of artists' processes, approaches, and techniques or the differing ideological intentions that separated live art from entertainment. This nomenclature has endured regardless of the fact that many artists rejected the term "performance," especially in Europe, where the concept of action connoted associations with Existentialism, free will, and an injunction to civic activism. The persist-

ence of the term "performance" is due primarily to the insistence of critics, while artists continue to invent more original appellations for their work.

The term "performance" has also been used to identify the inherent physical properties and behavior of materials, especially in the late 1960s before conceptual, process, installation, environmental, and performance art were historicized as distinct art historical movements. Performance (in its connection to process, et al.) developed into a leftist alternative to the production of art objects and was presented in nontraditional spaces as a means to subvert both the market and the regular institutions of art. It confounded the reduction of art to undifferentiated merchandise by displacing objects with artists, subjects whose performances resisted commodification (even as the residue of those acts could still be objectified and sold). Through its emphasis on action, performance recovers the social force of art. It remains one of the last and most effective modes of resistance to all forms of domination, from globalization to totalitarianism. From the 1950s through the 1970s, performance constituted the most forceful opposition to capitalism in the visual arts. But when the line between performance and popular forms of entertainment, such as musical concerts, became less distinct in the 1980s, some styles of performance devolved into what has been described as "Perfotainment."

In the twentieth century performance entered the aesthetic practices and theories of the futurists, cubists, the Bauhaus, the German expressionists, the Russian avant-garde, Dada, and surrealists. These investigations abruptly ceased with World War II, only to reemerge in the early 1950s, when performance was developed systematically by visual artists (see Vergine 1974; Henri 1974; Goldberg 1988; Roth 1983). A brief overview is needed to emphasize the methodical elaboration of the medium since 1952. At that time, French painter Georges Mathieu, following Harold Rosenberg's interpretation of Jackson Pollock's painting process, began to perform his action paintings before audiences in Europe, Japan, South America, and the United States. Mathieu was pictured in *Time* in 1954, 1955, and 1957. Although Mathieu's international renown was established in the mid-1950s, artists and art critics in the United States suppressed his importance (Stiles 1998). Nonetheless, Mathieu influenced a range of artists whose aesthetic concerns varied widely from the Japanese Gutai and the Viennese Action artists to his fellow monarchist and friend Yves Klein (and through Klein to Piero Manzoni). In 1956, Allan Kaprow began to theorize happenings. Participatory, baroque in their complexity, and spontaneous—whether scripted or not—happenings were meant to destroy the nonparticipatory gaze, shatter the proscenium, and involve an audience in the creation of a work of art. This approach differed extensively from that of Fluxus, an international collective of artists who created events scored with textual instructions that could be performed on a stage before an audience or simply in the mind. In the early



1960s, individual performances began to be created by this small but international fellowship of Fluxus artists. They influenced a younger generation who became associated with body art and who were schooled in the eclectic environment of happenings, Fluxus, minimal, conceptual, installation, and video art. Artists creating body art in the late 1960s and 1970s focused on spare acts of endurance, the use of the body as a tool, and iconic representations of the phenomenological conditions and existential situations of the body (Sharp 1970). The notoriety that performance art achieved in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s had to do with body actions that emphasized stamina, perseverance, bodily danger, and tests to the limits of endurance. One thinks especially of the actions of Günter Brus, Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic, Ulay, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Stelarc. While performance, together with video, installation, and conceptual art, dominated the 1970s, a return to expressive figurative painting took place in the 1980s. This was especially true in Germany where many of the painters had studied with or were influenced by Beuys. In this regard, it must be said that performance art reconfigured humanist concerns traditionally associated with figuration and refocused attention to actual bodies, revalidating the timeless subject matter of the body (Stiles 1992).

Women deserve special attention in any account of performance in the 1970s for their development of the genre. Indeed, women represent the majority of artists engaged in the practice of performance art. This demographic reflects both the absence of a history of male achievement in this field (in comparison to painting and sculpture) and the widening of opportunities for women offered by a new genre. Women were also central to the early theorization of performance art (Vergine 1974; Chicago 1975; Roth 1978, 1983; Goldberg 1988). Women associated with happenings, Fluxus, and actions in the 1960s (Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Alison Knowles, Shigeko Kubota, Lygia Clark, and Valie Export, among others) set the stage for a plethora of performances by women in the 1970s. In 1972 Womenhouse opened in Los Angeles. There such artists as Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, Faith Wilding, Aviva Ramani, Sandra Orgel, and a host of other women used performance as a medium and strategy to bring public attention to women's issues, including pioneering representations of rape, incest, domestic violence, and other abuses of patriarchy. From the late 1960s to the present, women have continually turned to performance as a means for creating powerful presentations of female-defined subject positions and agency. They have aggressively countered representations of women as passive victims, questioned exclusive definitions of gender and sexuality, and troubled over the racially exclusive and universalizing connotations of the very word "women." Drawing on the civil rights movement for examples of positive empowerment, women's performances emphasized the concept of "the personal is political." Adrian Piper, Howardina Pindell, Ana Mendieta, Coco

Fusco, and others addressed the racist discourses of art history. Along with performance artists like Raphael Ortiz, David Hammonds, William Pope L., James Luna, Jimmy Durham, and Guillermo Gómez Peña, women explored the phenomenology of the raced body, racial stereotyping, the construction of racial bodily images, and the complicated relationship between race and gender.

By the 1970s, it became evident that the documentation of performance was dependent upon a wide range of photographic media from photographs to film and video. Indeed, photography has been central to capturing the ephemeral conditions of performance throughout the twentieth century. A notorious example is that of Marcel Duchamp, who, in 1921, appeared in a photograph by Man Ray with a shooting star shaved on his head by Georges de Zayas. Photography served as a realist medium producing documents and artifacts until the advent of digital images. No series of performances exhibits the vulnerability of photography as a medium for conveying truth better than the photographs taken by Ludwig Höffenreich of the tableaux arranged by Austrian artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler. Between 1965 and 1966, Schwarzkogler designed images of castration, employing the artist Heinz Cibulka as his model. Höffenreich's black-and-white photographs of Cibulka performing in Schwarzkogler's sets duped critics and art historians alike into believing that Schwarzkogler castrated himself in a performance and died as the result of this action (Stiles 1990). After Nam June Paik pioneered artists' video in 1965, many artists began to use it as a tool to record performances in their studios, augmenting the development of video as a medium in its own right. From the late 1960s to the present, video became the primary medium for recording and documenting artists' performances. Moreover, different generations with differing artistic concerns and styles combined video with performance in installations to create a hybrid medium. One thinks of artists ranging from Wolf Vostell, Yayoi Kusama, and Marta Minujin to Valie Export, Orlan, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ulricke Rosenbach, Jochen Gerz, Ann Hamilton, Mona Hatoum, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and Katarzyna Kozyra.

By the 1980s, digital and electronic media made more explicit and transparent just how pervasively lens culture had become a part of performance. The use of technology also shifted attention to electronically mediated and enhanced bodies, highlighting the trope of interactivity that has adhered throughout twentieth-century art, and which is a fundamental point of intersection between performance and kinetic art. In this light, the debt of interactive, multimedia art to the participatory ethos of happenings forty years earlier becomes strikingly apparent. In the 1990s, performance artists grappled with the digital manipulation and enhancement of perception, the ethics of the habitat of virtual reality, the agency and privacy of individuals subjected to sophisticated surveillance, and the implications of genetic engineering. For example, in early 2000 in

collaboration with a French genetics lab, Eduardo Kac of Brazil was the first artist to create a "transgenic" animal—a green fluorescent rabbit that he named Alba. Kac's intention was to perform the political task of living with and socializing a genetically engineered mammal in the context of home and family.

The 1980s also witness how the term "performance" began to serve multiple aesthetic tasks from production to presentation and interpretation; and a plethora of books, anthologies, exhibitions, and symposia appeared on the subject in the 1990s. Performance art as a category of visual display entered the *Academic American Encyclopedia Deluxe Library Edition* only in 1994. It must be remembered, however, that Kaprow began to teach various approaches to performance in the late 1950s, followed by other practitioners of happenings and Fluxus. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro first taught feminist performance in 1969. The history of performance began being taught in universities in the late 1970s. Performance studies emerged as a subgenre of cultural studies in the late 1980s. By the 1990s, performance was so pervasive, and its political impact so indisputable, that even academics began to appropriate its cultural efficacy, interpreting the act of writing as "performative," and imagining themselves "performing the text." They adapted the term "performative" from J. L. Austin, who, in the mid-1950s, used the concept to describe a class of expressions that are not descriptive, have no truth-value, but in their very utterance *do* something (Phelan 1993; Jones and Stephenson 1999). By 1999, the rhetoric of the body in the visual arts had become so pervasive that art historian James Elkins would make the universalizing claim that "every picture is a picture of the body" (Elkins 1999, 1). Although this slogan eviscerates the particular meaning of the body as an artistic medium, such a statement would be unimaginable without a tradition of performance in the visual arts spanning nearly a century, and the intensive period of its systematic development as a genre for nearly fifty years. Clearly, by the end of the twentieth century, performance art had raised the stakes of the body in culture, revitalizing art itself by drawing it away from commercial stagnation and ingrown formalism and refocusing it on human, corporeal necessity.

### III

The theater is born in its own  
disappearance, and the offspring of this  
movement has a name: man.

—Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (1967)

Through mimesis, performance heightens the relations among unmediated reality, imitation, and representation, challenging distinctions between the real and the artificial. The *Orgies Mysteries Theater* (OMT) by Austrian artist Her-

mann Nitsch is a good example. Beginning in 1957 at the age of nineteen, Nitsch began to theorize the OMT. A hybrid presentational art, the OMT draws upon and synthesizes Greek tragedy, opera, and Judeo-Christian rituals in a happening-like and participatory atmosphere. The OMT combines live, nude body actions with elaborate and varied music, architecture, animal sacrifices and the use of their carcasses, organs, and blood to create complex visual performance. Nitsch's aesthetic sensibility demands formal perfection, yet the content of the OMT is resoundingly controversial and political in its exploration of the destructive and violent history and practices of Western culture. The OMT resembles a medieval morality play in its externalization and dramatization of psychological and spiritual conflict, and the personal and social battle between good and evil. While Nitsch fuses nudity, blood and entrails, and blasphemous images of Dionysian orgy with Christian symbolism, he employs these elements allegorically as metaphors for cathartic experiences aimed at healing the psychic pain of a violent culture. The plays of the OMT, therefore, are self-contained art events, even though they may last for many hours or days.

In stark contrast to Nitsch's ritualized festivals, other strategies of performance require that artists intervene directly in everyday life, creating situations that confuse both a spectator's and an artist's ability to define reality. Such was the aim of the Situationist International (SI, 1957–72), anarchists who saw themselves as Marxists with populist ideological foundations. The SI, led by artist-theorist Guy Debord, offered a sustained critique of many forms of domination, the political division and control of urban space, and the general poverty of contemporary intellectual life. They established a praxis that conjoined theory with constructed situations ("a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events"). And, as methods to alter society, they offered the aesthetic concepts of *dérive* ("a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society") and *détournement* (diversion of "preexisting aesthetic elements" into "a superior construction of a milieu") (Knabb 1981, 45). The SI has been widely credited—along with innovators of happenings like Jean-Jacques Lebel (who knew Debord)—with contributing to the French student and worker revolts in May 1968. Lebel also interacted with and sometimes influenced activists such as Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, as well as philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychologist Félix Guattari (Stiles 1999). The SI set out strategies for what would become associated with public art, a mode of direct engagement in the social sphere pioneered by practitioners of performance who used action for cultural change.

Such approaches to performance confound the traditional mimetic function of art. Drawing on A. O. Rorty, Elin Diamond has noted that, "mimesis . . . posits a truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and



image . . . referent and sign in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness" (Diamond 1993, 363). By making art and reality sometimes *appear* seamless, performance art thrusts viewers into a confrontation with the conflict between reality and the truth claims of mimesis (realized through imitation, dramatic realism, and other representational tactics). Actor and theorist Geoff Pywell identified the disparity between the real and the representational as inhumane when he argued that, "What we encounter in mimesis proper is an inhumanity, a process of human denial. . . . At this level, mimesis denies us the passage of [change] that reality itself makes undeniable" (Pywell 1994, 33). For Pywell, the "inhumanity" of mimesis is how it renounces the effects of time in the changes of life. The provocation performance art puts to the visual arts—where objects have conventionally held process (or change) in dynamic suspension—is of externalizing the conditions of making and reception, and problematizing the actual effect of art. In performance, viewers see the creation of an aesthetic object in process, and they see what was heretofore only imagined, namely that the change inherent in the object's construction actually alters maker and viewer. In short, performance requires that two previously incommensurable experiences be united in an uneasy and irresolvable alliance: mimesis and reality.

Jim Dine's *The Smiling Workman* incorporated both "the process of human denial" at the core of mimesis and the contingencies of change in reality. For Dine initiated his work with a mimetic set of actions, which he, in turn, then imitated in reality. First, Dine exhibited and also was the exhibition; he performed painting for the audience and was the painter who made the painting. Second, Dine juxtaposed his own active left hand (in the process of making) with the representational (mimetic) hand and its previously printed marks on the canvas. Third, he mumbled mimetically in concert with his own grumbles that had been prerecorded. Fourth, the red substance Dine drank was not paint at all but tomato juice. He thus resorted to mimetic denial by drinking a substance imitative of red paint. While his entire performance was a play between actuality and mimesis, the substitution of juice for paint betrays the denial and disappointment of mimesis. For at the pinnacle of his performance, Dine, perhaps wisely, rejected the very reality with which his performance otherwise contended. The processes of change that this mimetic act denied were the actual merging of the artist with his medium (to say nothing of the physiological effects of paint inside his body). What is essential to remember about *The Smiling Workman* is that, like all performance art, it was simultaneously a presentation and a representation, presented and represented in real time. All performance art uses both metaphor and metonymy and acts as a commissure between reality and metareality. Performance art both *is*, and *is* a representation of, life itself.

Moreover, performance has become such a controversial cultural force be-

cause, like a commissure, it situates art and the artist between reality and mimesis, creating a transpersonal visual aesthetic that impinges directly on reality while all the time imitating it. Performance artists have dared to treat their bodies in unconventional ways in order to visualize psychophysical, social, political, and cultural experiences and needs, and to demonstrate the effects of destructive, violent, or sexual change on the body. It is often difficult for the public to understand that *all these acts are real*—part of the artist's life—and *mimetic*—having little to do with the conduct of that life outside of the aesthetic frame of art. In these ways, performance has constrained mimesis, employing the interstitial continuum of metonymical connection to deconstruct traditional metaphorical representation. Performance art puts pressure on mimetic denial and suppression of the actual struggles of the body in the flow and duration of life. Mimesis has also been disabled in feminist performance, where the female body has been the site of intense theoretical discourse, especially of a poststructuralist, Marxist, and psychoanalytical sort. Following Luce Irigaray, Diamond (1993) has noted that these methods are "polemically antimimetic: signifier is released from signified, sign from referent, signification from intention" (364). Regardless of method, she adds, a "commitment to the truth-value of one's own position, however complex and nuanced," is critical in order to transform "the mirror into a political tool [wherein] mimetic submission becomes destabilizing mimicry" (369). Performance thus embodies a unique undertaking of truth insofar as it presents the actual body of an artist in an actual action, all the while playing back and forth across the field of mimesis, metaphor, and representation.

This transpersonal aesthetic of performance proved intolerable to critics and artists alike, especially Michael Fried, who in his much debated essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967), denounced "non-art" all art that includes the beholder in a situation (Fried 1968, 125). Exhibiting an aversion to contextual art, as opposed to putatively autonomous art, Fried argued that art must "defeat or suspend" any work that approached the condition of "theater" (135). Significantly, Fried's essay appeared one year after artist Dick Higgins expansively described performance as *intermedia*, a dialectical medium that conjoins formalism, new social institutions, growing literacy, and new technologies (Higgins 1966). Other artists, however, augmented resistance to presentational art by denying their own earlier performative work. Robert Morris, for example, suppressed his former association with Fluxus and the connection of his work to that movement in a letter dated 4 April 1964 to Hanns Sohm (the German collector whose happenings and Fluxus archive is housed in the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

Indeed, the history of performance has suffered from the widespread influence of various models of formalism (in many disguises) that have bifurcated the avant-garde into ascendant and marginal versions of modernism. Rosalind Krauss's influential art-historical narratives have represented artists like

Mondrian and modernist institutions like the Bauhaus as "detach[ed] from the social, [with a] sense of self-enclosure . . . flattening into nothing" (Krauss 1993, 2). But the only way to believe this position is either to ignore or be ignorant of such central modernist texts as Mondrian's essay "Home-Street-City" (1926) or Oskar Schlemmer's "Man and Art Figure" (1924). Mondrian theorizes the social conditions and implications of his own artistic practice, progressing from the privacy of the home (*oikos*) to the public sphere (*polis*): "Neo-Plasticism . . . views the home not as a place of separation, isolation or refuge, but as part of the whole, as a structural element of the city [Mondrian's emphasis]" (Mondrian 1970, 11). As for the Bauhaus, Schlemmer placed a schematized head, arguably the foremost sign of the human body, at the center of the *Bauhaus Logo* (1922) and therefore at the signifying center of modernism. In "Man and Art Figure," and in a series of drawings made from 1924 through 1928, Schlemmer cited as proper aesthetic materials everything from astrology, ethics, aesthetics, and "the sphere of ideas" to psychical impulses and the sensate psychosexual mechanical and dematerialized aspects of the body with its invisible heartbeat, circulation, respiration, the activities of the brain and nervous system (Schlemmer, in Lehman and Richardson 1986, 15, 127–45).

Moreover, if modernism is disinterested and autonomous, what is one to do with Degas' *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, c. 1880–81, which introduced all manner of extra-artistic materials and presentational strategies? In this sculpture, Degas represented an adolescent figure in tinted wax, dressed in a ballerina's tutu with a horsehair wig tied in a silk ribbon. The sculpture was originally exhibited in a glass case like an anatomical, scientific specimen in all its mimetic realism and was criticized as science rather than art (Callen 1995). And what about the collages of Picasso and Braque, with their allusions to health and risqué puns like "[jo]urnal" that reference bodily functions (Rosenblum 1976; Leighten 1989)? Certainly the implications of *urnal* were not missed by Duchamp in his urinal, "The Fountain" (1917). Indeed, it could be argued that Duchamp's entire oeuvre transformed painting and sculpture into a veritable corporeal discourse of the physiological and psychosexual aspects of sight and the voyeuristic and exhibitionistic situation of display that shapes the social conditions of art.

These are just a few of the many examples of modernist practice that perplex any unified theory of either modernism or postmodernism. At the same time, the aesthetic qualities of the body (as a part of nature) force consideration of the body's status as an object of great beauty and infinite sublimity, qualities that emerge from Kant's notions of aesthetic judgment. Finally, performance, it must always be remembered, is a wily category able to evade art-historical exigencies and sidestep hegemonic interpretations.

## IV

Even at this very moment, action, work, love, thought, the search for truth and beauty are creating certain realities which transcend the transitory nature of the individual. And the fact that this assertion has become trivial, that it has been put to use too often—sometimes to the worst kind of ends—does not mean that it has stopped being true.

—Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947)

Henri Lefebvre understood that what is lived has dignity and must be honored. Performance literally embodies his affirmation of human experience, ushering into visual discourse certain truths of individual and collective circumstance. The pointed emphasis in performance art on ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological realities must be understood as a response to stifling constructions of subjectivity, to taboos about and control of sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationality, and to the social repression of the body and its fluids. While politics have always been central to the representational tactics and realist aesthetics of the avant-garde, since the 1950s artists have brought their bodies as material to bear on the entire gamut of social problems. The history of the interaction between performance and social movements has yet to be written, but direct action in performance has proved potent as political criticism. Performance artists have asserted somatic and psychological memories of destruction in the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Vietnam, Rwanda, and the Balkans. They have presented problems related to corporeal survival in a century of escalating wars, genocide, and impending nuclear destruction. They demonstrated the personal and public effects of individual suffering and wider "cultures of trauma" (Stiles [1993] 1996a). Performance artists have responded to the displacement of the body by new reproductive technologies, the creation of transgenic and cloned beings, and the cyborg prosthetic, or postbiological, body. They have attended to the ways in which new electronic technologies have radically affected the public domain, transforming the very structure of information and its relation to knowledge. ACT UP, a gay activist group, was among the first of many artists (and the most politically effective) to use performance to address HIV and AIDS, drawing public attention to this world health crisis. Performance art was also the vehicle through which artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison alerted the public about impending ecological disasters.

Performance has confronted the unprecedented shifts in power that led to globalization, beginning with glasnost and perestroika established by Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev. His 1986 policies for opening the USSR to more democracy led directly to the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. The following decade witnessed the release of Nelson Mandela on 11 Feb-

ruary 1990, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the progressive political democratization and privatization in China and Southeast Asia. In countries where free speech and action had been curtailed until the 1990s, performance became *the* primary visual means through which to express long-repressed energies, ideas, and experiences. New artists who used performance as a forum for political commentary appeared globally. One thinks of Xu Bing, Song Dong, and Zhang Huan in China, Kendell Geers, Minette Vari, and Tracey Rose in South Africa, Oladélé Ajiboyé Bamgboyé in Nigeria, FX Harsoni and Arahmaiani in Indonesia, Dan and Amelia Perjovschi, Matei Bejenaru, and Theodor Graur in Romania, Pavel Braila and Mark Verlain in Moldova, and many more. Performance has also been a key medium to visualize problems in the Middle East for artists like Uri Katzenstein and Aya & Gal in Israel and Mona Hatoum in Lebanon. Perhaps the best measure of the political efficacy of performance, however, has been the public careers of playwright Vaclav Havel, first president of the Czech Republic, and musicologist Vytautas Landsbergis, a president of Lithuania, who were involved in happenings and Fluxus, respectively. Performance is rightly understood as intrinsically activist and socially subversive of state policies, earning a privileged position on the margins of culture, where it serves in the liminal capacity as a tester of cultural values, sometimes to the point of rupture.

In addition, women, people of color, and gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals have been especially instrumental in the developing discourses of alterity that emerge from considerations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationality. These topics have been explored in performance art more than in any other visual art medium. In fact, performance provides a unique domain wherein the fixed identities dictated by social mores have been challenged. In the 1970s, many performance artists experimented with alternative personae, including Eleanor Antin, Martha Wilson, Jacki Appel, Lynn Hershman, Linda Montano, Urs Luthi, and Jürgen Klauke. Their work is foundational not only for artists like Cindy Sherman, Orlan, and Yasumasa Morimura, but also for public figures like Madonna and Prince. Performance artists have exposed all variety of cultural taboos from discussions of sexuality to conditions of living monitored by the state. As a result, more than any other group of visual artists, performance artists have been arrested and punished throughout the world. Czech artist Milan Knizak (founder of the Aktual Group, a member of Fluxus, and eventually director of the National Gallery in Prague) holds the record for having been arrested over three hundred times between 1959 and 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia for his performances and lifestyle. Surveillance of performance artists and their work, especially in the United States, has resulted in many performances being decried as pornographic, and a decade-long debate in Congress in the 1990s regarding the allocation of tax dollars to fund the Na-

tional Endowment for the Arts. Paradoxically and ironically, these debates demonstrate both the power of performance art in cultural life and how the over-determined scholarly and public responses to the sexuality displayed in performance art have occluded its aesthetic and cultural contributions to both art and society. Nevertheless, performance artists have posited their medium as a model for imagining, enacting, and living life differently.

In conclusion, performance tells a truth about art, the truth of the processes of making, accentuating the human body at the center of the production of art. The body, that somatic *a priori*, was neglected in the visual arts until artists began to focus attention on the act of making in the twentieth century. Their performances illustrated how the artifact is only an index of art; it is not—necessarily—art itself. Rather, performance is a commissure, an interstitial continuum operating at the dynamic intersection of intentionality, presentation and representation, and the complex context of interpretation where the transaction of social and political meanings occurs. Performance posits an interpersonal visual aesthetic that asserts human exigency and agency at the center of the lived conditions of being. Performance by artists is a metacritical discourse that comments on the act of doing, while actually doing something in real time. It alters the use of objects through acts and serves as an object lesson in how meaning is created by such actions. In these ways, performance approaches the conditions of truth imagined by Martin Heidegger when he wrote in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: “Art is truth setting itself to work” (Heidegger 1998, 426). That “work” is the action of the artist who smiles through a mimetic painted grin and asks for responsible interaction by calling for “HELP”.

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# **Critical Terms for Art History**

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*Edited by Robert S. Nelson  
and Richard Shiff*

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