Re Re Re: The Originality of Performance and Other (Post)Modernist Myths

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The call for an interdisciplinary history of performance by Marranca initially seems rather astonishing, until one surveys the field. After all, has not performance art/live art always engaged with transdisciplinary tactics that utilize theatre, visual art, dance, and media culture without necessarily being one thing or the other? Certainly PAJ has actively promoted the interrelationship of performance and visual art, bringing together the work of theorists, theatre critics, avant-garde artists, and playwrights in one journal, often in the same issue. And yet, live art/performance, in spite of claims to the contrary, insists on a genealogy that is rooted in the visual arts, and, in spite of the art world’s embrace of postmodern theory and the cult of (un)originality, makes claims for the ontological uniqueness of the performance act. In the performance/live art mythos of the visual arts, the audience is key to the meaning of the work. In order for an action or event to actually “be” a performance, an audience has to be there, the performance has to be unique, and it has to take place just once.

Indeed, recent attempts to define what makes live art different from everything else have resorted to suggesting what live art is not rather than what it is. In keeping with the counter-cultural spirit in which live art/performance art first appeared in the late sixties and early seventies, the theorists/apologists for live art have embraced a definition of this work that emphasizes its resistance to reproduction and commodification along with its ability to challenge cultural and societal norms. Taking his cue from Lois Keidan, the founder, along with Catherine Ugwu, of the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), who had suggested in a strategy document written for Arts Council England in 1991 that “Live Art represents a challenge to received
ways of doing, thinking and seeing; a rejection of single art form practice; a way of opening frontiers to any political, social or cultural agenda,” Adrian Heathfield, co-editor with Amelia Jones of Perform, Repeat, Record, has suggested that live artists “take the spectator into conditions of immediacy where attention is heightened, the sensory relation charged, and the workings of thought agitated.”

This definition of live art, promulgated quite successfully by the London-based LADA (and publisher of this book) and a number of academics, artists, and critics (including Heathfield), has served to cement the notion of live art as singularly unique and unable to be reproduced, a challenge to contemporary cultural norms of simulation and hyper-reality. However, the rapidly growing trend for avant-garde performance reenactment suggests that the situation is otherwise. Performances premised upon audience participation, delegated performances such as those conceptualized by Tino Sehgal, Vanessa Beecroft, and Francis Alÿs, performances commissioned for the openings of art fairs and biennials, and reenactments and reperformances of canonical work from the seventies and eighties by artists such as Allan Kaprow, Linda M. Montano, Carolee Schneemann, and Yoko Ono belie the claims made for performance’s originality.

An entire industry of reenactments and reperformances has developed, particularly in the U.S., in conjunction with blockbuster museum exhibitions and gala performance events such as the biannual Performa organized by Roselee Goldberg. Live art/performance (the terms are used somewhat interchangeably), in such situations, is in danger of becoming yet another commodity spectacle emptied of meaning or significance—an image, like many others, designed to lull the masses into complacency while giving them the fiction of viewing agency. Certainly, the canonization of the artist Marina Abramović for Seven Easy Pieces (performed at the Guggenheim as part of Performa 2005) and the MoMA retrospective The Artist is Present (2011), during which Abramović sat and interacted with museum visitors while trained dancers and actors reperformed her work, suggest that the claims for originality, transcendence, immediacy, and affect that have been made in the name of performance/live art need to be carefully unpacked.

As the work of the Bristol UK-based Performance Re-enactment Society demonstrates, there is actually much to be gained when returning to past performances, whether it is a reconnection with a Zeitgeist that is now past, a new connection made between the past performance, the contemporary performers, and the audience, or an entirely new work of art. The questions that concern many artists and critics today is how present and past performances construct meaning, point to a new economy of reciprocal exchange between viewer and viewed, and challenge or tweak the everyday without falling into the trap of becoming an empty capitalist spectacle in the service of the museum or institution. What is the nature of the live event, and is it more authentic than the second-hand event disseminated through the media? What sort of “gift” can performance give others, and how can performance/live art instantiate a meaningful exchange, or Begegnung, between the viewer(s) and the artist?
These are the questions that *Perform, Repeat, Record* sets out to answer. An ambitious and lengthy collection of essays, the volume is not about reinstating the romantic approach to performance in which the body of the artist is re-contained through an aesthetic sleight of hand into a sign of transcendence. Rather, it is about undermining, once and for all, the romantic myths of totality, originality, and teleological development that has obscured a more nuanced understanding of what performance art might mean in relationship to contemporary culture while permitting the more egregious performance/spectacle excesses of artists such as Beecroft, Fraser, and Koons. Nevertheless, both editors view performance, in all its manifestations, as having the potential to open up new avenues of thought and undermine the relentless commodity culture of post-capitalism. As Jones writes, “at its best, the return to the live via complex modes of reenactment, re-staging, reiteration, might be seen to be sparked by (and eliciting of) openness and hope, by way of presenting new possibilities of intervention and by activating fresh ways of thinking, making, being in the world.” A collection of essays, performance documents and interviews that engage with the debates over live art/performance, reenactment, reperformance, and performance documents, *Perform, Repeat, Record* addresses the potenitalities of live art from a variety of positions and points of view. The amount of material in this text, which counting the index is 652 pages, is unusual for an academic text. The book includes a wide range of offerings: academic articles, “scripts,” photographic documentation, interviews, manifestos, artist’s statements, and even a timeline of live art in art history, authored by Jones specifically for this book.

Jones’s timeline, placed about two-thirds of the way through the book with the somewhat unwieldy title “Timeline of Ideas: Live art in (Art) History, A Primarily European-US-based Trajectory of Debates and Exhibitions Relating to Performance Documents and Re-Enactments,” serves as a concise eight-page summation of the *raison d’être* for this book: namely, that live art is always already mediated in that the audience/viewer/participant and artist know that the body performing is also a sign of something else, that often the documentation of live art is as important as the act itself, that the viewer’s engagement through this documentation can be as fruitful as actually seeing the act unfold, and finally, that the interest in reenactment can be viewed as a productive engagement with pasts and futures. As Jones has written elsewhere, “in practice the now is both always and never graspable—the artist is always already thinking of pasts and futures in moving her or his body through space, gathering and repositioning objects and images, reworking pasts for present futures.”

The “Timeline of Ideas” stands in contrast, as it was no doubt meant to, with Roselee Goldberg’s more extensive, yet less informative, hagiographic histories of performance, histories that adhere to the New York-centric bias of most histories of art, histories which telescope earlier avant-garde movements (and artists) such as Dada and Futurism into a linear trajectory that ends (as all history must) with the New York School. Jones’s timeline, on the other hand, includes important publications such as J. L. Austin’s
How to Do Things With Words, major exhibitions and festivals concerned with live art, such as the 2008 exhibition Re-Enactments, organized by John Zeppetelli at DHC-Art Foundation in Montreal, Canada, institutions devoted to live art such as LADA, and of course work by individual artists. Jones’s timeline is not the only timeline included in the book either; the first section — “Theories and Histories” — concludes with a timeline of Eastern European art, authored by Angela Harutyunyan with Varadan Azatyan, Tevž Logar, Vesna Madžoski, Joanna Sokłowska, and Eszter Lázár. These timelines compliment the articles, documents, and interviews in the book, placing the work of artists in the context of the literary and critical Zeitgeist. Beginning just after World War II, the timelines re-insert the messy bodies of avant-garde artists into the sterilized and disinterested narrative of art history.

Those familiar with Jones’s writing on performance, modernity, postmodernity, and art history will no doubt already be familiar with many of these arguments, as they have been rehearsed in other publications, beginning with Jones’s important 1997 article “‘Presence’ in absencia: Experiencing Performance As Documentation.” Jones has long argued that the live act/performance marks the body as representational, and that the live act can be experienced equally from documentation. More recently, Jones has addressed the issue of reenactment vis-à-vis the work of Marina Abramović, whose work she encountered when Manchester University’s Whitworth Art Gallery mounted Marina Abramović Presents in 2009. Jones participated in the performance events organized in conjunction with the 2009 exhibition, as well as attended the MoMA retrospective The Artist is Present (it has subsequently become the subject of a 2012 film The Artist is Present, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre). In response, Jones argued that the supposedly unmediated encounter with Abramović at MoMA was little more than a simulation of relational exchange. Meanwhile, the reenactments — and the original event — are reliant on the extensive documentation of the event.

Perform, Repeat, Record hinges on the idea of reenactment, with Abramović taking center stage. Indeed, a photograph of a reenactment by the artists group Janez Janša (a Slovenian group of three artists named after a right-wing politician) of Imponderabilia, the 1977 gallery entrance performance by Abramović and Ulay, graces the front and back cover, with Abramović and Ulay replaced by two pregnant women (front cover) and the two women holding their babies (back cover). In each case the narrowness of the doorway forces a man to squeeze between them, just as the original gallery visitors had to squeeze between Ulay and Abramović. The book includes an interview with Abramović conducted by Jones, as well as an excellent article by Mechtild Widrich, “Can Photographs Make It So? Repeated Outbreaks of VALIE EXPORT’S Genital Panic since 1969,” which demonstrates that Abramović’s recreation of the performance for Seven Easy Pieces was based on the documentation after the fact, rather than the performance in the cinema (which might or might not have happened).

Most of the articles in the “Theories and Histories” problematize the relationship
between documentation, reperformance, and canonical performances. This section includes Rebecca Schneider’s “Performance Remains,” rewritten for publication in this volume, André Lepecki’s discussion of re-presenting Allan Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts for Performa 2007, and a critique, authored by Hannah Higgins, on the reduction of Fluxus to Maciunas and his manifestos. As acknowledged in the title of Jones’s timeline, the book still lists towards the west, albeit a “west” that includes Mexico, Brazil, and Eastern Europe. And yet, there are some very interesting artists and festivals that originate in Asia. For this reason, the most compelling article included in the first section was Meiling Cheng’s “The Prosthetic Present Tense: Documenting Chinese Time-Based Art.”

Writing about the work of Chinese artists Qiu Zhijie, Yang Zhichao, Wang Chuyu, and Wang Hong, Cheng argues that in the case of these three artists, documentation, which would seem to come after the live event, in the West can function as prosthesis, but here is indistinguishable from the performance itself. In China, Cheng suggests, “the use of documentation in these artists’ performance work reflect a post-Tiananmen tactic in response to the heightened political tension and official proscription regarding avant-garde art . . . .”

Cheng’s rereading of the significance of documentation is reflected in Heathfield’s approach to the material, which parts company to some degree with that of Jones, making for an interesting tension throughout this book. Heathfield, a curator and critic who is immersed in the contemporary and very vibrant live art scene of the United Kingdom, is not quite ready to cede his belief in the efficacy of live performance, even as he acknowledges that the nature of “being there” is critically slippery for both the spectator and critic. Not surprisingly, Heathfield authored the introductions for the “repeat” and “record” sections of the book, the former devoted to live art documentation and the latter comprised of interviews with artists and practitioners. An advocate of the radical potential and indeterminacy of performance à la Peggy Phelan whose essay he included in the Live anthology, Heathfield writes that the “multiple lives of performance . . . suggest that one of performance’s most consistent and recurring conditions is transformation.”

For Heathfield, Perform, Repeat, Record constitutes an archive of sorts, albeit one that is willfully partial and incomplete, not to mention subjective and interested. Indeed, one of the biggest strengths of this book (and in some cases weaknesses) is the manner in which it reflects the interests of the editors—the theoretical premise of this anthology certainly reflects Jones’s work more so than that of Heathfield. So too does the inclusion of artists from southern California who were aligned with the feminist art movement or have been associated with identity politics. On the other hand, the extensive nature of the documentation/archives that comprise two thirds of the book, the emphasis on interviews and in some cases the inclusion of UK-based artists who are not well known outside of the UK, suggest Heathfield’s influence, hence the inclusion of artists such as Hayley Newman, Tim Etchells, and Franko B.

What is also a bit surprising is what was not included in this book, especially since it was published by LADA, an organization that has actively promoted
work by minority artists. In addition to aggressively supporting live art by UK-based artists, LADA has also facilitated a number of international exchanges such as the 2005–2006 project China Live, a collaboration between Live Art UK, Chinese Arts Centre, LADA and Shu Yang of the DaDao Arts Festival. As a supplement to the Euro-American timelines, timelines of Asian, Canadian, and South American live art, theories, and reenactments would have been very welcome. In light of Heathfield’s editorial role, the selective inclusion of some UK-based artists and writers at the expense of others seemed rather arbitrary, especially in light of the fact that many of these artists, writers, and artists groups have been concerned with reenactment and questioning the originality of performance long before it became fashionable.

There was not, for example, a contribution from Paul Clarke or the Performance Re-enactment Society. Deirdre Heddon, whose book 2008 book Autobiography and Performance addressed the chasm between the performer, her/his autobiography, and the representation/sign of identity is also absent. Heike Roms, who has done extensive archival work on Welsh performance artists, was not included. Nor was there any discussion of the work of Trace Collective and André Stitt, particularly their durational performances which are painstakingly archived (often by Roms) while they occur. Finally, it is striking that Claire Bishop, who has been extremely critical of the allegedly transgressive and authentic nature of performance with her writing on audience participation and more recently on the relationship between commissioned performances, capitalism, and spectacle, was not included or even cited in this book, in spite of her popularity in the United Kingdom and her frequent appearance in the pages of Artforum.

For that matter, neither were any of the other critics who have recently written extensively on participation: Grant Kestor, Gregory Sholette, Blake Stimson, and Nato Thompson. Similarly, Allan Kaprow (Happenings) and the artists associated with Fluxus, including Dick Higgins and Allison Knowles, premised their practices on audience participation. In the case of the Fluxus artists, performances were scored so that other artists could reenact the work. Both Kaprow and Fluxus are included in Perform, Repeat, Record but only by way of a discussion of the nature of reenacting Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts (André Lepecki) or a discussion of how the emphasis on Maciunas has obscured the manner in which Fluxus practice anticipated relational aesthetics (Hannah Higgins).

No book, even one as dense as Perform, Repeat, Record can include everything. And while it can be argued that Bishop, Thompson, et al represent a tangential and not entirely related discourse regarding performance, it would have been interesting to have considered the implications of participatory/social art on authenticity, reenactment and documentation, particularly as it relates to theatre, which as Bonnie Marranca pointed out, has been all but ignored by art historians. This is unfortunate, as much of the best writing and work on performance has originated in theatre, while reenactment is inherently theatrical. In fact, the line between avant-garde theatre and performance/live art, which was never very clear cut, has become almost non-existent. Trained actors and dancers reenacted Abramović’s
canonical performances for The Artist is Present. The Slovenian-based Eastern European theatrical group Via Negativa has reenacted canonical theatre, dance, and performance work with the goal of eliminating theatrical illusion.7 In 2007, the artist and activist Paul Chan organized Waiting for Godot in New Orleans. As with previous performances of the play in politically charged environments (it was directed by Susan Sontag in Sarajevo in 1993), Chan’s version was designed to both activate the community and highlight the government inaction that prevented the rebuilding of a city occupied by people with little money and political power.

Waiting for Godot in New Orleans was sponsored by Creative Capital. As director of Creative Capital, Nato Thompson organized and produced the event. Subsequently, the documentation of the making and producing of the play has been organized into a book and a 2010 exhibition at MoMA. An event such as this, in which the artist/activist is neither the primary actor or creator in a performance with which he is credited raises many of the same issues that were raised in Perform, Repeat, Record, particularly as regards the role of documentation, which until quite recently has been used to make a distinction between avant-garde performance and theatre. However, as Phillip Auslander argued in “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” (included in this book but originally published in PAJ 84 in 2006) documentation has become performative in and of itself. For Auslander, who draws a distinction between what he calls the documentary and the theatrical, with the former providing a record of a previous event and the latter a performance/display of the event, the role of the performance document has drifted towards the theatrical. Auslander writes:

It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist’s aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.8

In his book Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture, Auslander argued that the idea of liveness was not an ontological condition but was instead historically mediated and dependent upon contextual circumstances. Auslander’s book, first published in 1999, caused something of a sensation when he refuted Peggy Phelan’s claims for the ontological specificity of performance, which, according to Phelan, resisted the economy of reproduction and consumption.9 The previous year, Jones had published Body Art, an expansion of her arguments in “‘Presence’ in absencia: Experiencing Performance As Documentation.” Perform, Repeat, Record, compiled in response to the trend for reenactments, elaborates upon these arguments. And while theatre continues to be given short shrift, there are at least two selections, both interview/dialogues, which point to the problematics engendered by the blurring of the meaning of theatre, live art, documentation, and reenactment. The first, an interview with Tilda Swinton, Joanna Scalan and Amelia Jones entitled “The Maybe: Modes of Performance and the ‘Live’” exposed the willful degree of art-world blindness to avant-garde performance
originating from someone other than an artist. Swinton, a well-known actress, conceived and executed the piece *The Maybe*, during which she reposed in a glass box. After conceiving the piece, Swinton invited the artist Cornelia Parker to design an installation around her performance—subsequently the piece was attributed to Parker, and not Swinton. The second, “Do it Again, Do it Again (Turn Around, Go Back),” an interview between Iain Forsyth, Jane Pollard, and Andrew Renton, dealt with Forsyth’s and Pollard’s recreation of “tribute band” concerts. By its very definition, a tribute band cannot possibly be authentic, and yet surprisingly the experience of those who attended the “live” events very closely replicated the experience of attending a concert by the actual artist.

The work of Pollard and Forsyth demonstrates Auslander’s contention that the concepts of authenticity and liveness are historically mutable. The tribute band re-creations of canonical rock and roll moments represent an active engagement with the rock and roll archives, along the lines of the Civil War reenactments discussed by Rebecca Schneider. If in fact documentation can become or substitute for the live performance, what drives the audience to seek out the actual performer or someone who is once removed from the actual performer? Why are tribute band concerts staged in art galleries and Civil War reenactments so popular? Why did so many people go to sit across from Abramović in what was so clearly a staged encounter? How is it possible that we are taking seriously Marco Anelli’s photographs of visitors to this event entitled *Marina Abramović Made Me Cry*?

In his introduction, Heathfield suggests that “for much of its life throughout the twentieth century, the presence of performance art (of the performer) has been both the proposed source of its cultural appeal and value, and the cause of its suspicion, marginalization, and denigration within many critical and institutional contexts. Presence, as it turns out, is both a philosophical and a theatrical notion, one in which literally ‘being there’ coincides with an event that plays out in real time.” At the conclusion of “Being Here,” cited at the beginning of this review, Marranca suggests that reperformance calls for a new understanding of performance history, one that incorporates both avant-garde theatre and performance/live art, one that utilizes new modes of critical discourse. *Perform, Repeat, Record* wasn’t conceived with the idea of re-presenting performance history, or even presenting an inclusive narrative of contemporary performance. Nevertheless, in its exhaustive presentation of different types of performances, documentation, and critical approaches, it suggests a way of reading performance that is no longer beholden to modernist notions of transgression, transformation, and the avant-garde.

NOTES


2. Amelia Jones, “Performance, Live or Dead,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 35.


5. For more information on China Live, see http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/lauk/china_live.html, accessed 12/15/2012.


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