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Barbara Clausen

#### After the Act—The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art

Contrary to its original nature, performance art, has through the historicization of its documentary material become an object and imaged based art form. As the trace of a message, this material not only adds to the image archive of art history, but is also part of the ongoing process of the cultural canonization of performance art. Initially as a press image, then as a historical document, and finally as a work of art, these images become part of the cultural archive. The accumulation of these moving and still pictures, sketches, manuscripts, and texts forms the pool out of which at most a handful of images will be filtered to represent the iconic status of a unique performance. The documentation of performance art becomes the bearer of the myth of a lost moment that can only be desired in its non-existence, as a substitute. The ephemeral and unique character inherent to a performance is repeatedly reestablished by means of the staged and medial repetition of its *disappearance* in the course of its historical and social reception. The reception and the historical transformation of the significance of performance from the image to a news value to a cultural commodity bear the marks of a hitherto largely neglected series of a contradictions, confirmations, and blind spots. The starting point for this publication is that interest in performance art cannot begin—and also cannot end—with the authentic experience, but rather runs counter to the ontological myths of origin pertaining to performance art and is to be understood as an ongoing process of an interdependent relationship between event, media-lization, and reception.

In the course of the exhibition and the symposium *After the Act* various forms of the medialization and historicization of performance art were (re)presented and discussed. The main aim of this book is to continue the debate on a critical and more sophisticated view of the reception history of performance art, which begins with the historicization of performance art by means of its documentary forms of representation. The following contributions address historical positions, forms of interpretation and appropriation pertaining to documentation, and questions of medialization, canonization, and institutionalization. The texts collected here range from interviews with performance artists and those who document performance art to most of the papers presented at the *After the Act* symposium from the fields of performance theory and art history. The *After the Act* exhibition concentrated on the re-staging of the documentary image material in contemporary art and the confrontation of this with the source images. This included showing historical documentary material by Joan Jonas and Terry Fox, and presenting video performances by Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy. The objective was to create a dialog between the originals and their artistic appropriation by Carola Dertnig, Daniel Guzmán, Luis Felipe Ortega, and Seth Price.

In the course of the exhibition and the symposium, the basic issue was the mutual relationship between performativity and medially and its significance for historicization, and this led to a number of approaches. Doris Kolesch and Annette Jael Lehmann were concerned with the question of the staging of the regime of the gaze, while Philip Auslander addressed the role of the chroniclers and their absence and presence in the process of transcription and the interrelationship between action and image. In her paper, and in her conversation with Joan Jonas, Babette Mangole concentrated on identifying and distinguishing between different kinds of performance art and their various forms of medialization, an issue that has hitherto received only little attention. This approach inevitably links up with the question of the definition and overlappings of authorship, as seen in Michaela Pöschl's thoughts on the cinematographic politics of the gaze and of the edit in the action films of Otto Muehl and Kurt Kren. Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Sam Gold looked at the cyclical recurrence of performance art since the early twentieth century and its inherent relationship to perceptions of time and *Zeitgeist*. Ultimately, what is at stake is the extent to which contemporary social political and cultural endeavors to reappro-

priate actionistic gestures of the past are linked to the present institutionalization and commercialization of performance art and its ephemera. How did performance art as a projection surface for utopian and authentic desires come to be an object in cultural memory, and how did it come about that, as a staged medium of "public phenomena of the present," it was turned into a commodity and thus made accessible for us? Has performance art today become the product of an economy of the cult of the individual, which utilizes nostalgic flashbacks to draw on a past and therefore also "de-fused" dynamic of the individual? Where is the potential for a critical (re)presentation of these works that have already been carried into the canon of art history?

"A person sees the event, he sees himself, he sees himself seeing the event, he sees himself seeing others who are seeing the event and who, maybe, see themselves seeing the event. Thus there is the performance, the performers, the spectators, and the spectator of spectators, and the self-seeing-self that can be performer or spectator or spectator of spectator."<sup>2</sup> (Richard Schechner)

Most performance artists were aware of the necessity of preserving their actions beyond the moment of their performative manifestation. This desire was based on the one hand on the need to influence the art-historical reception of the artist's own work, and on the other hand on the social and economic objective of bringing the work to a broader audience. In most cases the audience present at the event was very small and consisted mainly of friends and colleagues, or of people who were there by chance. In contrast to the fact that these actions, which were accessible only to a very few, are widely known. If the small number of live spectators is compared to the level of awareness regarding specific documentations and performances, then the function and significance of the documentations of performance art as an instrument of mediation and distribution becomes clear.<sup>3</sup> This documentation has become a kind of "first layer of history,"<sup>4</sup> a primary source that provides both practice and theory with models and material to work on.

To what degree was the radically staged authenticity of a performance refracted by the filter of its documentarists? As a spectator, a performer, and a mediating agent, the person behind the camera observes

the action and also enters into a mutually determining relationship with the events through the process of image production. Photographers and filmmakers in the performance scene in the United States, like Babette Mangolte and Peter Moore, or in Viennese Actionism, such as Kurt Kren and Ludwig Hoffenreich, developed their own individual visual language representing their relationship with the action. The presence of the performer is transferred to the presence of the spectator through the camera. As an interface and producer of images the camera assumes a dual function. As in cinematography, the consciousness of the performance lies in the apparatus of its reproduction, which stands between the needs and desires of the actors and the observers. And yet, unlike the gaze of "live experience," the traces of performative events in photography and film are always a joint product of the visual strategy of their documentarists and the selection of those commissioning them. All endeavors for objective reproduction notwithstanding, the documentation aestheticizes the events it portrays purely through its formal temporal characteristics. It reduces it to moments that further bolster the myth of the coincidental and are part of the history of performance art.

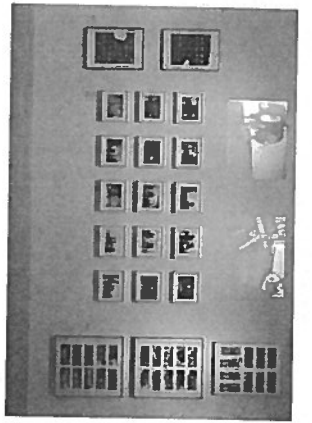
According to Philip Auslander, performance art represents the climax of the surplus value in the tension between two contradictory socially determining factors—the media spectacle and the longing for the immediate non-mediated experience. The staged nature of the documentary and the documentary element of the staging in performance art are situated within the force field of a culture of spectacle and hyper-medialization. The relationship of performance art to its staging in images is complex and difficult to define, and does not require the classical and antagonistic distinction between a theatrical and an ontological creation of the image. For Auslander, our understanding of the staging of the documentary and vice versa is mirrored in the treatment of the presence and the absence of the spectators. The claim to the authenticity of "being there" is a stubborn feature of the collective reception of performance art. This is guaranteed above all in its iteration in images. Frequently it is the chroniclers and eye-witnesses who attempt to make a claim on originality and authenticity, a claim that is based on the ephemeral nature of performance art. Applied to the idea of "pure" ontological documentation of performance, the concept of performativity, as Auslander shows, would indicate that "the act of documenting an event as a performance constitutes it as such."

One of the most important documentarists of the New York performance scene in the 1970s is the photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte, who draws out the strategies and motives of her own documentary activities in her contribution. Mangolte describes a sophisticated working method anchored between intuition and technology. Where Mangolte's practice differs from that of other chroniclers is in her multi-disciplined activity as a camerawoman, a filmmaker, and a photographer, as well as in her ability to capture the subversive nature and the novelty of the performances she documents, whether these are dance, theater, or art. Her photos and films are a sign of her endeavor for neutral and objective reproduction. At the same time her aesthetic is not only influential as an ideological indicator of their time, but also legible as such.

The following conversation between Babette Mangolte and the performance artist Joan Jonas provides insight into the conditions of work and production three decades after the event. Jonas and Mangolte relate their work together to both historical and current contexts and to the question of the difference between the photographer and the performer. Both see a primary need to reflect on the different forms of performance, from conceptual art to dance to theater, in the context of each specific form of media representation. Mangolte documented Jonas' work for about ten years. Her recordings of the performances of *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* as a photographer and cameraperson were shown as a part of Jonas' entire archive of the *Organic Honey* series, constituting the curatorial starting point of the exhibition. The six times Jonas' *Organic Honey* was performed between 1972 and 1981 were documented in photos and video by twelve different chroniclers, including the artist herself.

The archive on show consists of drawings, notes, more than one hundred developed photographic prints, and several hours of unedited video material.<sup>5</sup> Until today *Organic Honey* has been presented and reproduced as a video, photographs, and objects in installations, exhibition catalogs, and in the specialist press.

*Organic Honey* occupies a special place in the history of performance art by virtue of Jonas' performative treatment of masking, gesture, and visual mirroring, which was echoed before the eyes of the spectators in a broad range of medial transcriptions. The technical recording and simultaneous playback was part of the performance, occupying a place not on the margins but rather in the center of the action. The process of trans-



Joan Jonas, *Archiv Organic Honey*, 1971–1980  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rasli

forming the live event to the image was made visible through its perpetuation. In *Organic Honey* Jonas staged a dual indexicality of the absent,<sup>6</sup> which, whether as a gesture on stage or as a represented gesture in the image reproduced through media, makes a process visible that is emblematic for performance art as a genre and its historicization. This is the moment when what is directly experienced enters into its multiply reproducible continuation, abandoning on the one hand the auratic claim to authenticity in performance art while on the other hand constituting itself in this very disappearance. One aspect of the challenge consists in observing the process of medialization on the level of content and visualizing it independently from its forms of representation. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes writes of photography as always carrying its referent with itself: “The photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both [...] In short the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on photography.”<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years after Barthes, the media studies expert Sybille Krämer, in her theory of the relationship between mediality and performativity, sees the medium not only as the bearer of a message, but also as participating in the translation and the substance of the message, and argues that it can only assume the function of memory through iteration and visual mediation.<sup>8</sup> What takes place is a reference of the media to the works of art that co-creates meaning. In the case of the documentation of performance art there is a relationship of tension that is situated between media generati-

vism and media marginalism. According to Krämer, this means that media also constitute what they convey, but then, after the completion of the medial translation, disappears again in reception and remains below the threshold of our perception.<sup>9</sup> In this context Krämer speaks of a mediality that causes performativity to become evident and at the same time inevitably disappears at the moment of representation via the bearer of the image. The medium thereby not only becomes the message—as for Marshall McLuhan—but also the trace of itself, which comes increasingly to the fore in the course of its historicization.

For Annette Jael Lehmann and Doris Kolesch, this is particularly the case for the performance avant-garde in art in the 1960s and 1970s, which concentrated on its medial reflexivity and making the moment of production its subject. In their contribution, the transcription of the performance from the live event to the projected image is anchored in the force field of its original performativity and its media representation. Lehmann and Kolesch discuss various strategies of the use of media that were crucial in the staging of images of the body and performative actions in the early video performances of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Joan Jonas. The recording media play a key role in these performances, inscribing themselves as the trace of a message in the bodily nature of the representation. When we speak of a contingent relationship of performance to its documentation, then this is a mutual relationship that inscribes itself both in terms of media and concept into its documentary forms.

Performance videos and photographs by the American artists Terry Fox, Bruce Nauman, and Paul McCarthy were models for the actions shown in *Remake* (1994–2004) by Luis Felipe Ortega and Daniel Guzmán. All of the monotone sequences of movement in front of the eye of the camera repeat an act of one the role models. A man is seen lying on his stomach and pushing a pot of paint along the floor; another man is seen bracing himself bare chested to spit out a fountain of water from his mouth; a third man repeatedly falls backward into the same corner to bounce back up as if he were made of rubber. Reproductions in black and white in catalogs, art and general interest magazines served as Ortega und Guzmán’s visual sources for these reenactments. The concentration of these short clips clearly shows—and not without a certain irony—the risk inherent to the physical and artistic repetition of gestures that have become famous. The reconstruction of the original as documentation is the product of a



Luis Felipe Ortega & Daniel Guzmán, *Remake*, 1994/2003  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rasstl

mutual process of appropriation. It is the dialectics of appropriation in which the repetition takes its form, and in which, according to the philosopher Rabel Jæggi, "both the appropriator and the appropriated change."<sup>10</sup> *Remake* restages the images of performance art that are anchored in the cultural imagination and determined by art-historical descriptions and photographic documentations. The paradigm becomes the placeholder for the performance, whose repetitive character is taken to the point of alienation in the process of imitation. Ortega and Guzmán refer to the reception of performance art as a balancing act between the medial representation of a historical position and the myth of the body continually injuring and testing itself, one which is permanently being re-transformed in cultural memory.

Serving oneself to the heroes of the canon is essential for Seth Price's *Digital Video Effects: "Spills"* (2004). Two years ago Price came across a home movie in Jonas' video archive, which had been made more or less by chance in 1972. It shows Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt in a heated debate with the New Yorker gallery owner Joseph Helman on the economy of immaterial art. Price then created his own artistic appropriation of the image material, which Jonas had originally not intended for exhibition. He reworked it visually by using a lava-lamp-like video effect known as "spill" that was popular in the 1980s, and then laconically presented the running monitor in a packing carton box. Situated between the *objet trouvé*, pop culture, and appropriation art, Price's installation *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"* (2004) profits from the myth of its protagonists,



Seth Price, *Digital Video Effect: "Spills"*, 2004  
Installation view MUMOK, Photo: Lisa Rasstl

while counteracting their authentic "gesturing". Guzmán and Ortega, as well as Price all enter into tantalizing relationship with their role models by way of the documentary sources. They make use of their success and at the same time openly and confrontationally speak of the burden of tradition that is the foundation of their appropriations. Both positions use staging to reactivate in the present what has been historically recorded and cemented, so as to shift the appeal of nostalgia onto the surface of their investigation. They counter this retrospective desire by physically eschewing the movements shown, or by masking out and commenting by means of dark spots that partly cover the surface. The documentation of performance art not only serves as a foil for appropriation processes, as Price, Guzmán und Ortega show, but also as a tool that subjects the apparently non-graspable to a new way of reading. In memory the various roles and functions of the protagonists in performance art tend to become blurred. On the one hand they seem to join together in the mythologization of the "pure" authentic experience of a unique action, a kind of chance melding of various elements. On the other hand the praxis of collaboration and thus also of conception together create the cultural understanding of performance art. The question of authorship or the claim to a new symbolic ownership of your own image and its conscious and unconscious inscription into the canon of art is something that many of the original protagonists demand.

It is in this sense Michaela Pöschl's essay looks at the mechanisms of the production of meaning via editing in Kurt Kren's early films of Otto Muehl's actions in comparison to Muehl's own documentation and action



Carola Dertnig, *Lora Sana*, 2005  
Installation view MUMOK, photo: Lisa Rastl

films. Working from the perspectives of film theory and art history, Pöschl investigates the mythologization that was particularly inherent to Viennese Actionism, by looking at the frequently repressed origins of the movements medial history. The focus of the analysis, which looks critically at issues of gender, is based on the vicissitudinous relationship between Muehl, the artist, and Kren, the filmmaker and commissioned documentarist, and the strong urge for authorship displayed by both. Can contact prints that were marked and selected by Muehl, and detailed storyboards for actions and notes, provide insight into a history whose image rejects any kind of conceptional basis? Is it possible to read issues of authorship and of the destruction of myths of origin into the representational aesthetics of past events?

In her installation *Lora Sana* (2005), Carola Dertnig also illuminates aspects of the loss of memory in that very artistic movement that was specialized in breaking open the repressed and turning taboo into show: Viennese Actionism. From the perspective of the only female member of the group, Lora Sana (62, actionist and today a producer of ecological cosmetics), who was ignored and hidden from view for over three decades, Dertnig provides retrospective insight to instances long gone. Sana's memories refer to her forgotten authorship in form of a wall text—between transcript and letter—and a series of reworked documentary photographs of Viennese Actionism. Presented directly adjacent to the MUMOK exhibition of its collection of Viennese Actionism, by way of a special opening in an otherwise closed wall that leads to the collection, *Lora Sana* as a

fiction becomes part of the history. The photographic documents and presentation of images by Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Günter Brus, and Otto Muehl serve as Dertnig's models for her fictional protagonist. Reproduced, collaged, and painted over, she adds a further trace of indexicality onto their surfaces. This is the new version of a history that has already been written by others, through which the fictional potential of documentation, memory, and oral narrative—and thereby the apparently so firmly cemented knowledge pertaining to art history—is scrutinized according to its economic value, gender roles, and identity formation. In Kren's and Muehl's films discussed by Pöschl and in Dertnig's photographic reworking and texts the patriarchal relationship of power between subject and object, and male and female performer, that is perpetuated within the documentation of performance art is critically questioned as a consciously staged artistic act, that in the course of history of its reception is further developed. Both in the theoretical and also artistic investigations by Pöschl and Dertnig—the former is also a performance artist—it is the moment of editing, proofreading, and the selection of images and lines of argument that becomes the determining factor for its reception. In other words, it is the excerpts and interventions, the variety and not the singularity of the subjective decision-making processes which through their perpetuation—decades later—reveal the beginnings of a potential reversal of our understanding. The material available provides us with the possibility of critically reviewing art history and looking at it in terms of its constitutive mechanisms.

Consequently historiography itself assimilates its own shifts over time and then reintegrates them into the canon. Through the self-reflexivity of its politics of representation performance art implemented a break with the historical narrative dominant in the 1960s—and thus clearly ripe to be broken with—and yet this break was ultimately defeated by its own means. This paradox reversal is the thematic starting point for the performance *Poor Theater* that was premiered in 2004 by the New York theater company The Wooster Group. Presented and discussed in the symposium by its dramaturg, Sam Gold, the piece took on the function of an interface to the question of appropriation of past performances that had been raised in the exhibition. Instead of publishing Gold's talk, there is a reprint of the *Poor Theater* brochure and a conversation with Gold, which looks at the cultural contextualization of the initial production and

long-term development of the play, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. *Poor Theater* is a confrontation based on the word for word reenactment of two performances through their documentation. The first is a 1968 BBC television recording of the play *Akropolis* (1964) by the theater director Jerzy Grotowski. In the same year this play was also performed in New York for the first time. The second is a teaching CD-ROM by the director of the Frankfurt ballet, William Forsythe, which was distributed shortly before he was dismissed by the city of Frankfurt. In both cases, which are thirty years apart, the issue at stake is the beginning and the end of an epoch. The re-staging by The Wooster Group refers in minute detail to the technical models and their transcriptive transference from the medium to the live performance. Discrepancies and frictions with the original are investigated, as they can only be played out in their repetition and medial replay. For Gold, *Poor Theater* is the expression of the atmosphere relevant to each time, finding its expression between theatrical restaging and dilettante imitation, and enabling the staging of the temporality of a non-graspable moment in the past.

The temporality that is inherent to performance art and its potential as an ideological indicator of its own time in its image-based forms of documentation is the starting point of Carrie Lambert-Beatty's thoughts on Yvonne Rainer's work from the 1960s. In her investigation, Lambert-Beatty refers to a 1965 photographic record of Yvonne Rainer's dance performance *Parts of Some Sextets*, by the most important American photographer of performance art in the 1960s, Peter Moore. Lambert-Beatty is interested in a historical and work-immanent reference of live art to the possibilities of its own recording and technical reproduction. She analyzes how documentary records and artistic staging of performance art embody the cultural-political changes of their own time and give expression to these as a part of the economy of the reproducibility of "unique" events. The photographs that Rainer selected for distribution and historization contain a dual indexicality, in which the moment of the inscription of the light on the film refers to the movement of gestures in space as shown. The focus is on the process of recording as a theme of the work itself, and the ways in it is reflected in the choreography. The difficulty here lies in being able to distinguish between the interconnected parallelities and intertwinings of performativity and mediality, which are both affirmative and paradoxical with regard to each other.

The affirmative claim to the authenticity of a performance is in its constitutive dependence on mediality, neither to be rejected nor to be met with unqualified assent, but rather should be rethought in terms of its parallel distinctions. Performance art, whose constitution is not completed with the event itself, is a processual form of art that is dependent on its reception. As a result performance art, in the course of its medial transcriptions "from the street to the picture on the wall," is subject to a great many shifts caused by reception, which *After the Act* attempts to reflect upon. The strategy in the shadow of remembrance's staging oscillating between the performance and the documentation is an integral part of performance art itself and continues to deserve our attention.

#### Notes

- 1 Martin Seel, "Inszenieren als Erscheinenlassen: Thesen über die Reichweite eines Begriffs," in *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*, Joseph Früchtl and Jörg Zimmermann (eds.), Aesthetica edition suhrkamp vol. 2195, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 56.
- 2 Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pittsburgh 1985, p. 8.
- 3 Since the early twentieth century it has been the reproduction and distribution technologies of photography and film, and since the 1960s the video camera, as both a recording and replay medium, that have contributed to the dissemination and popularity of performance art.
- 4 Quotation from a podium discussion with the photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangote and the performance theorist Rosalee Goldberg, "Rosalee Goldberg and Babette Mangote in Conversation," in the course of the exhibition *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance* at the Tate Liverpool, United Kingdom, November 2003.
- 5 The latter led to two twenty-minute video works: *Vertical Roll*, which consists of material recorded within the performance, and a documentary video recording the performance from the perspective of the audience of *Organic Honey Vertical Roll* in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.
- 6 Christiane Kuhlmann, *Bewegter Körper – Mechanischer Apparat*, Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln, *Studien und Dokumente zur Tanzwissenschaft*, Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Cologne p. 194.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1981, p. 6.

- 8 Sybille Krämer, "Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat," in *Medien, Computer, Realität: Zur Veränderung unserer Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen durch die Neuen Medien*, Sybille Krämer (ed.), Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 73.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Rahel Jäeggli, "Aneignung braucht Fremdheit," in *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 46, June 2002, p. 62.

Philip Auslander

### On the Performativity of Performance Documentation

Consider these two iconic images from the history of performance and body art: one comes from the documentation of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), the other is Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960). It is generally accepted that the first image is a piece of performance documentation, but what is the second? Burden really was shot in the arm during *Shoot*, but Klein did not really jump unprotected out a second storey window, the ostensible performance documented in his equally iconic image. What difference does it make to our understanding of these images in relation to the concept of performance documentation that one image documents a performance that "really" happened while the other does not? I shall return to this question below.

In classifying these images and others like them, I propose two categories: the "documentary" and the "theatrical." The documentary category represents the traditional way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is understood. It is assumed that the documentation of the performance event provides both a record of it through which it can be reconstructed (at least to a degree) and evidence that it actually occurred. The connection between performance and document is thus thought to be ontological, with the event preceding and authorizing its documentation. Burden's performance documentation, as well most of the documentation of classic performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s, belongs to this category.