



**Performance Art (V43036 UK)**

**Essay Submission**

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**Monday, 10th December 2012**

**The practical and conceptual implications of
 documenting and displaying performance art**
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**Introduction**In this essay I examine the differing qualities of liveness, authenticity, presence and aura in relationship to live performance art and its documentation and display. Rather than restricting my analysis to traditional documentation media of photography, film and video, I consider the impact of digital technology, concluding with a view that digital technology has challenged the accepted understandings of liveness, authenticity, presence and aura in performance and its documentation and display.

**Liveness**

If we accept that performance art is enacted viscerally (via a body or bodies) and live before a group of spectators (an audience) and is located at a specific time, place and context then any documentation or mediated display cannot replace the quality of liveness present in the original performance nor replicate the original’s spatial and temporal context.

“Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”
(Phelan 2012:146)

From the viewer’s perspective there is a distinct qualitative difference between watching a mediated display and being present in the same space and time as the performer. The quality of liveness is replaced by an insubstantial representation with an associated loss of intensity.

". . . no documentation can give you the feeling of what it was, because it cannot be described, it is so direct, in the documentation, the intensity is missing, the feelings that were there. “
(Abramovich 1978:759)

The actuality of the performer sharing the same moment and space as the viewer gives performance art a visceral, immediate and potential dangerous quality, more so perhaps in today’s age of ubiquitous digital and at-a-distance media communications.

A recording is safe, it is virtual, it can be stopped, paused, it cannot touch you, compared to the actuality and presence of the performer it has little visceral quality and becomes something other, perhaps the very opposite of performance art, having no body, substance or immediacy.

Marshall McLuan’s famous statement in relationship to technology and media “The medium is the message” (McLuan 1964) could be used to argue that mediated performance becomes more the medium than the message – documented performance becomes television, film, photography and no longer performance. Likewise the viewing context is completely different from being situated in a performance space – it has its own cultural and social references - the cinema, the living room, the art gallery, the library. With the advent of the internet and digital media, the viewing context is now mobile and pervasive, representational media can be accessed and read anywhere - the living room, the street, in a café or out in the wilds of nature. This variable location and change of context is defined by the viewer rather than the performer, representing a loss of control in the possible readings of a documented performance.

Peggy Phelan believes that the essence of performance is transitory; it is of the moment and disappears. Any attempt to record the moment defeats the essential quality of performance:

“To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.”
(Phelan 2012:146)

Phelan goes on further to say that performance is defined by its unique quality of being non reproductive, thereby removing itself from the capitalist trappings associated with copying and reproduction:

“Performance in a strict ontological sense is non-reproductive, it is this quality which makes performance the runt of the litter of contemporary art. Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.”
(Phelan 2012:148)

Abramovich, even though she clearly recognises that documentation can never capture the feelings of live performance, offers a pragmatic view:

“We have to be practical. I think that there is no way that millions
of people can see one piece. What if somebody in New Zealand wants to see it?
Then he should be able to have very good documentation. Documentation is
extremely important.”
(Abramovic 2012:45)

**Authenticity**

Live performance has an authenticity, whereas a recorded performance, as with any recorded media is subject to questions concerning its veracity – can we trust what we are seeing is actually what it purports to be? Given the powerful range of digital effects we now have at hand, almost anything that can be imagined can be created virtually, people, places and events can be edited, faked and re-contextualised .

Despite issues of authenticity, many performance artists utilise representational media as a means of capturing the transitory moment as evidence that a performance actually took place.

In The Performativity of Performance Documentation, Philip Auslander (Auslander 2006) suggests that there are essentially two types of documentation - documentary and theatrical. Theatrical documentation is where the artist performs solely for the documentary recording medium. Examples include the photographs of Cindy Sherman, the video work of Mathew Barney in the Cremaster series and the photograph by Man Ray of Duchamp as Rose Selavy.

Auslander states that the two types of documentation are mutually exclusive, theatrical documentation can exist without any witnessed event having taken place, whereas documentary documentation presumes that an event must have actually happened and been witnessed for it to qualify as documentary documentation.

The interdependence of performance event and documentary documentation is echoed by Amelia Jones:

“The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened: the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological ‘anchor’ of its indexicality”
(Jones 1997:16 )

However ascertaining as to whether documentation is genuine documentary documentation is not possible, precisely because representation is mediatized, it is not real and in the moment, representations can be manipulated after the event and therefore there is no guarantee of authenticity.

Yves Klein famous photograph “Leap into the void” appearing at first glance as documentary documentation, evidence that he actually did leap into the void, is in fact, a fake. The photograph is posed and involved a safety net which was removed during darkroom processing. Modern digital media enables much greater illusions of portrayed reality to be manipulated and artificially created, calling into question whether documentary evidence has any degree of authenticity.

Does the authenticity of the document matter; is it important that the event actually took place?

When we know that Yves Klein did not really leap into the void, but instead a safety net, does this knowledge impact on our reading of the photograph? Instead perhaps we have to question our instinctive belief in the assumption that a photograph represents reality, it stands for something that actually once happened. In the digital age, where image manipulation is far more sophisticated than photographic processing, we can no longer take for granted “the truth” of any digital representation.

I believe there are two key factors involved in the reading of documentary representation, first, the intentionality of the author and secondly, the interpretation by the viewer. Performance documentation is carried out by the artist with a distant audience in mind, both temporally in the future, and spatially, in many locations. The documentation has an intended cultural trajectory, to be read by others as documentary evidence, proof that a performance - fictional, constructed or actual took place.

Auslander suggests that authenticity is not important and places the onus of interpretation directly upon the viewer’s reading of the document as a performance.

“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.”
(Auslander 2006:9)

This viewpoint I sense would be happily shared by many performance artists, it offers a creative freedom in the creation of performance documentation, irrelevant as to whether an audience witnessed the performance event, or whether a live performance actually took place. However critics might disagree, for the veracity of documentary evidence is called into question, although on the other hand, by necessity critics will often write and comment on performances that they did not witness, but viewed via documentation.

 **Presence and Aura**

The live performer can be said to have or exude presence whereas a recording may even be regarded as lifeless or “dead” in comparison. People can possess charisma, a powerful form of presence which can charm and mesmerise. The charismatic person is there in the moment, reading you, ready to react, able to quickly control and manipulate how you might behave and feel. The interaction between performer and audience has a palatable energy, which can change from moment to moment. The conventional recording has little presence, it is unresponsive, it cannot change or react, it is located in the past and its content is prescribed, fixed and static.

In the essay “Cyclic repetition and transferred temporalities: Video installation as performative matrix”, Dr Yuji Sone discusses the relationships of absence and presence to video installation, suggesting mediated performance has an implied presence and can be seen as conceptual performance. However these terms suggest a weak, cerebral concept of presence, in comparison to that generated by physical presence.

“Michael Vanden Heuvel summarises this relationship between presence, physicality, and performer: ‘the disciplined performing body is exhibited as the empowered source whose physical aura can capture and guarantee Presence [with a capital P’] and once again recuperate reality in all its spatial, temporal, and physical fullness’ (quoted in Shepherd and Wallis 2004: 233) [34].
So, presence in the sense of the Artaudian legacy is a power emanating from the body, as an aura that approaches the real’”
(Sone 2010:8)

The concept of aura is associated with the work of Walter Benjamin and his seminal work “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1968). Benjamin argues that the aura is associated with the authenticity and presence of an original artwork existing in a specific time, place and context, and that any reproduction loses this original aura.

A photograph or video may generate a feeling in the viewer, but subjectively the work embodies a different aura from the original, by representing the past, the recorded representation can be said to emanate a ghostly aura.

*“..while Benjamin critiques the dilution of aura in an artwork that had been mechanical reproduced, ‘[Benjamin also] describes how a different aura is manifest, a permanent imprint from the ghostly representation’ Dixon also supports this idea of a different aura by referring to Roland Barthes, who suggests the photograph as a live phenomenon, though paradoxically generating a sense of the past and the dead”*

*(Sone 2010:9)*

The emphasis hear appears to be placed upon the live reading of the reproduction, with the suggestion that this is where the aura resides, in the phenomenal moment of the viewer’s interpretation.

*“Here is where the aura resides-not in the thing itself but in the originality of the moment when we see, hear, read, repeat, revise.”*

*(Davis 1991:386)*

Sone and Davis in their analysis of mediated performance share the view that the aura resides in the moment the viewer engages with the documentation, similarly Auslander suggests that presence and authenticity are found through “*perceiving the document itself as a performance”* (Auslander 2006:9). There may well be an experience of some type of aura through mediated documentation but in comparison to the experience of an original live performance, the aura is implicit and conceptual, rather than actual and visceral.

Amelia Jones has argued that what gives a photograph its aura is its contiguity – it represents an imprint of a (once) live person.

"The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here. . . . A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.

..photography has never provided us with the truthful appearance things, but it has guaranteed, through the magic of contiguity, the possibility of a direct emotional empathy across an otherwise insurmountable abyss of space and time.”
(Jones 2001:21)

The digital image threatens this notion of contiguity:

“Digital images are in time, but not of time. And yet they look just like photographs, so much so that it's getting harder and harder to tell which is which. Contiguity depends on the knowledge of that difference; remember, it's what we bring to the photograph but what is nonetheless already there. If we don't bring that knowledge, then there is no contiguity effect; and no contiguous umbilical cord means no more photography “
(Jones 2001:22)

In relationship to performance and documentation, digital technologies challenge notions of authenticity, liveness, presence and aura.

“The work of art in the age of digital reproduction is physically and formally chameleon. There is no clear conceptual distinction now between original and reproduction in virtually any medium. These two states, one pure and original, the other imitative and impure, are now fictions….”
(Davis 1991:381)

Traditionally a video recording of a performance is static, its content is fixed and does not change over time. The viewer passively watches a documentation which is played out in a linear manner over time. Digital technology challenges these assumptions, the documentation may be interactive and non-linear, engaging with the viewer and can change in response to the viewer actions, it generates a new type of aura, that of responsiveness. Digital enhanced replay enables multiple viewpoints, rather than the one single fixed viewpoint of the single camera. Virtual worlds such as Second Life enable the viewer to move around a simulated three dimensional environment, being confronted with “live” virtual characters – the divisions between representational documentation and live performance have become blurred and indistinct.

Performance groups such as Blast Theory and Forced Entertainment utilise multimedia and
technology as performative media in order to comment and critique on modern day life in a digital and mass media world.

“ postmodernist art does not position itself outside the practices it holds up for scrutiny. It problematizes, but does not reject, the representational means it shares with other cultural practices.”
(Auslander 1989:132)

Virtual actors engage with real performers on stage, digital illusions appear to be alive and acting in the present. The concept of documentation is altered by the ubiquitous mobile camera and broadcast to the masses via Youtube. Through telepresence technologies such as Skype we act as if present when we are not. The new technologies enable people to become other, to alter their identities, and notions of truth and authenticity, space, time, context and location have become fluid and dynamic.

The actuality of live unmediated body based performance art feels both archaic and anarchic in the context of the digitalised and media world.

“Performance artist Eric Bogosian for example described live theatre as:

Medicine for a toxic environment of electronic media mind pollution…Theatre is ritual. It is something we me together every time it happens. Theater is holy. Instead of being bombarded by a cathode ray tube we are speaking to ourselves.
Human language not electronic noise.

(Bogoisian 1994: xii)

.. most important for the present discussion, he sets live performance in a relationship of antagonistic opposition to mediatisation and imputes the oppressive regime of electronic noise imposed upon us by the mass media”
(Auslander 1999:132)

**Conclusions**

The discussion of documenting and displaying performance art is contextually dependent upon both the definitions of performance art and the representational media for documentation. Traditionally the two have been seen to be either mutually exclusive or having some interdependency associated with contiguity. Digital media has challenged traditional and modernist concepts of performance, art and documentation, blurring the lines between the real and the virtual – challenging notions of authenticity, presence and aura. No longer can representational documentation be clearly separated out from performance, postmodern performance embraces this collapse and is continually exploring and referencing the complex inter-dependency of performer, media and viewer.

The impact digital technology has upon the analysis and understanding of performance history is perhaps the most profound:

“Situating theatre and performance history within a media ecology moves our historical investigations beyond the binary of the live and recorded, beyond the question of authenticity and presence (perhaps beyond the “liveness problem” itself) to a model of performance history in which the goal is neither to recount what “really happened” nor to reconstruct an event as a “ghostly” substitute for the performance that no longer exists. The project of digital historiography will be to actively attend to the processes by which a performance constitutes, mediates, and is mediated by networks of digital exchange and to trace our own engagement within those networks”

(Bay-Cheng 2012:40)

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