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## PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

### A Brief History and Some Advice

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The term *performance* entered art critical and academic discourses in the 1970s, to name a new visual art form and to distinguish dramatic scripts from particular productions of them—that is, from performances on stage.<sup>1</sup> Similar terms were *events* and *happenings* in the 1950s and 1960s and *body art* and *experimental theater* in the 1970s and 1980s. Conventional histories locate the roots of performances, events, happenings, body art, and experimental theater in the futurist, dadaist, and surrealist movements of the early 20th century. Here, in excerpts from two such histories, are an overview and brief descriptions of those movements.

#### *Overview*

Members of the historic avant-garde movement throughout Europe (ca. 1900-1935) wanted to

propose an “other” theatre, different in every way from what had gone before: a theatre freed from the chains of literature, constituted as an autonomous art form; a theatre which did not imitate a reality which actually existed, but which created its own reality; a theatre which nullified the radical split between stage and spectator and which developed new forms of communication between them, so that the chasm between art (theatre) and life, so typical and characteristic of bourgeois society, might be bridged. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 115)

#### *Futurism*

The launching of futurism in 1909 was a typical example, with a manifesto by Filippo Marinetti in . . . *Le Figaro*. Futurism is in fact rather better known for its manifestos than for its actual artistic achievements, but both contributed importantly to the performance tradition of this century. The interest of the futurists in movement and change drew them away from the static work of art and provided an important impetus

for the general shift in modern artistic interest from product to process, turning even painters and sculptors into performance artists. (Carlson, 1996, p. 89)

### Dadaism

[From the] founding of the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 in Zurich . . . [all] dadaist activities were directed at the spectator. While at first they only aimed to "épater le bourgeois," these ventures occurred increasingly in the form of an organized assault on the audience, a "strategy of revolt" . . . aimed at challenging and reexamining the purely passive attitude of expectation and customary practices of spectator reception. In this way, they attempted to dissolve the discrepancies between art and society for the duration of the performance. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, pp. 267-268)

### Surrealism

Perhaps the most important contribution of the surrealist movement to subsequent experimental theater and performance was the theoretical writing of Antonin Artaud, which exerted an enormous influence in the 1960s and 1970s. In his visionary *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud advanced his own powerful version of the argument found throughout the early twentieth-century avant-garde that the traditional theatre had lost contact with the deeper and more significant realms of human life by its emphasis on plot, language, and intellectual and psychological concerns. The subjugation of the theatre to the written text must be ended, to be replaced by a spectacle of "direct" and "objective" action: "cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models; resplendent lighting, incantational beauty of voices, the charms of harmony, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements . . . masks, effigies yards high, sudden changes of light." (Carlson, 1996, pp. 91-92)

### ◆ Events

An *Untitled Event* produced in 1952 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina by composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, painter Robert Rauschenberg, and others "has

often been cited as the model for the wave of happenings and related performance events that swept the art world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In many respects, this event recapitulated many of the motifs and practices of earlier avant-gardes," according to one historian (Carlson, 1996, p. 95). In *Untitled Event*, performances, "each timed to the second, took place in and around an arena audience" (Carlson, 1996, p. 95):

Each performer was given a "score" which consisted purely of "time brackets" to indicate moments of action, inaction, and silence that each individual performer was expected to fill. . . . Cage, in a black suit and tie, stood on a stepladder and read a text on "the relation of music to Zen Buddhism" and excerpts from Meister Eckhart. Later he performed a "composition with a radio." At the same time, Rauschenberg played old records on a wind-up gramophone with a trumpet while a dog sat beside it listening, and David Tudor played a "prepared piano." A little later, Tudor started to pour water from one bucket to another. . . . Cunningham and others danced through the aisles chased by the dog. . . . Rauschenberg projected abstract slides (created by colored gelatin sandwiched between the glass) and clips of film onto [his "white paintings"] on the ceiling; the film clips showed first the school cook and then, as they gradually moved from the ceiling down the walls, the setting sun. (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, pp. 233-234)

### ◆ Happenings

In the late 1950s, Allan Kaprow invented "happenings," and this label was applied to all sorts of experimental performances in the 1960s.

A key event in the history of modern performance was the presentation in 1959 of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery [in New York City]. This first public demonstration established the "happening" for public and press as a major new avant-garde activity, so much so that a wide range of performance work during the following years was characterized as "happenings," even when many creators of such events specifically denied the term. Audiences at Kaprow's happening were seated in three different rooms where they witnessed six fragmented events, performed simul-

taneously in all three spaces. The events included slides, playing of musical instruments, posed scenes, the reading of fragmentary notes from placards, and artists painting canvas walls. (Carlson, 1996, pp. 95-96)

### ◆ *Body Art and Experimental Theater*

In the 1970s and 1980s, visual and theater artists developed two different forms of "performance art": the "body art" of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and other visual artists; and the "elaborate spectacles not based on the body or the psyche of the individual artist but devoted to the display of nonliterary aural and visual images, often involving spectacle, technology, and mixed media" (Carlson, 1996, pp. 104-105; see also Sayre, 1995) of Laurie Anderson, Lee Bruer, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and, later, Spalding Gray, Bill Irwin, and other theatrical storytellers, jugglers, and clowns.

According to Amelia Jones (1998), the "body art" of the 1960s and 1970s was a "set of performative practices" that used "passionate and convulsive relationships (often explicitly sexual)" with audiences (whether physically present or viewing documentary photographs, films, videos and other texts), to "instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism" (p. 1). Furthermore, and not incidentally, because it was "dramatically intersubjective," body art undercut the "masculinist and racist ideology of individualism shoring up modernist formalism" in art criticism (p. 3). For example:

*Interior Scroll* [was] originally performed in 1975. . . . Her face and body covered in strokes of paint, [Carolee] Schneemann pulled a long, thin coil of paper from her vagina ("like a ticker tape . . . plumb line . . . the umbilicus and tongue"), unrolling it to read a narrative text to the audience. Part of this text read as follows: "I met a happy man, a structuralist filmmaker . . . he said we are fond of you/ you are charming but don't ask us/ to look at your films/. . . we cannot look at/ the personal clutter/ the persis-

*tence of feelings/ the hand-touch sensibility.*" (Jones, 1998, p. 3)

In *Transference Zone* (1972), [Vito] Acconci locked himself in a room with a group of photographs and objects owned by seven significant people in his life. One at a time, he let in visitors who knocked on the door, transferring his feelings about these "prime" people onto the unsuspecting recipient. . . . Playing out Freudian notions of transference—a dynamic involving the projection of one's subconscious conflicts and desires onto another—Acconci's piece opens out the contingency and performativity of identity and subjectivity itself. (Jones, 1998, pp. 139-140)

Experimental theater performances, on the other hand, "developed the aesthetic of a new theatre through productions which picked up the program of the historical avant-garde movement . . . and seemed to fulfill it: the 'retheatricalization' of theatre which was to be a radical move away from the literary theatre predominant in Western culture since the eighteenth century" (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 200). An example is Robert Wilson's visual opera of the 1970s:

His manipulation of space and time, his fusion of visual, aural, and performing arts, his utilization of chance and collage techniques in construction, his use of language for sound and evocation rather than discursive meaning, all show his close relationship to earlier experimental work in theatre, music, the visual arts, and dance. Speaking of *Einstein on the Beach* [1976], Wilson advised: "You don't have to think about the story, because there isn't any. You don't have to listen to words, because the words don't mean anything. You just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements in time and space, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures." (Carlson, 1996, p. 110)

### ◆ *Performance Ethnography*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists began to turn their ethnographic field notes into performances, and theater artists and academics in performance studies began to produce or

