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Performance Art in the 1990s and the Generation Gap

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ABSTRACT: In the 1990s, the question of the legacy of historical performance was posed with a particular sense of urgency. In the context of most pioneers of the art form having retired from live performance, reenactments not only reproduced past works but positioned artists within the genealogy of performance. The sense of the passage of a generation and the transmission of the memory of past performances were made explicit by Marina Abramović in *The Biography* (1992), a theatre piece in which she stages the very process of accounting for her past, as well as by Takashi Murakami and Oleg Kulik, who emerged on the art scene in the 1990s and mimicked live works from the past.

KEYWORDS: Performance; Reenactment; Generation; 1990s

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Performance Art in the 1990s and the Generation Gap

PIERRE SAURISSE

> [T]he saddest thing you could possibly imagine – you could just cry right away – is to see '70s performances repeated in the '90s. It can be so sad, so displaced, so completely out of time.
>
> Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Talking with Marina Abramović, Riding on the Bullet Train to Kitakyushu, Somewhere in Japan'

In the 1990s, the reenactment of historical performances was becoming a marked phenomenon. Although on some occasions artists re-performed their own works from the past, this trend was mostly the doing of younger artists looking at art history. In the context of an understanding of performance being largely based on visual documentation, this tendency allowed works often previously known through no more than a handful of iconic images to be put back in the spotlight of live presentations.

The 1990s saw the question of the legacy of early performance being posed in fresh terms, and with a particular sense of urgency. Reenactments not only reproduced past works but positioned artists within the history of performance. The example of Marina Abramović

is particularly significant in that she took charge of the recreation of her own works in a theatrical production mounted in 1992, whereas the cases of Takashi Murakami and Oleg Kulik are illustrations of artists engaging with the history of performance at the beginning of their careers. Underlying these echoes of historic performance in the 1990s is the awareness of the passage of a generation and the constitution of the genealogy of performance.

Performance appeared on the art scene with a sense of utter newness. Events such as the festivals organized in Paris by Jean-Jacques Lebel from 1964 or the Destruction in Art Symposium that took place in London in 1966 revealed the strength of this nascent art form and its multiple facets. The feeling prevailed that a new form of artistic expression was coming into existence. Allan Kaprow explained in 1966 that it was 'in the midst of a young activity' that he wrote his book on what he then called 'happenings'.[1]

Performance enjoyed unprecedented exposure in the 1970s while it found a linguistic anchor in the term 'Performance Art'. This recognition of performance was a remarkable achievement for its creators. It could be argued that these pioneers developed a specific consciousness of a generation — not as a mere age cohort but as a group distinct from others 'within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experience in different specific ways'.[2] In a seminal essay, the sociologist Karl Mannheim describes this social phenomenon as a 'generation unit, which represents a much more concrete bond than the actual generation as such'.[3] Distinguishing themselves from other artists for their involvement in live art, the pioneers of performance art formed a 'generation unit' of their own.

The generation of artists who propelled performance centre stage redirected their activities fairly quickly to the making of objects. By the end of the 1970s, Vito Acconci was concentrating on design and

1 Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966), p. 150.

2 Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge, 1952), pp. 276–322 (p. 304).

3 Ibid.

architecture, and in 1981, Gina Pane opted for partitions instead of live actions. As Abramović commented retrospectively, 'the originators of the medium were no longer young, and [performance] work was very hard on the body.'[4] In one of his last performances before he definitively converted to sculpture, Chris Burden played with his own history and mythology as performance artist by inviting the audience to look at the scar left on his arm after he was shot in his 1971 piece *Shoot* (*Show the Hole*, 1980).

The withdrawal of key artists from live art created a gap in the history of performance, and this gap consigned the once young medium to history. Soon after the early phase of performance ended, the period around 1970 came to embody the 'golden years' of this art form, as they were dubbed by RoseLee Goldberg in 1984.[5] Around the same time, Wayne Enstice commented on the liberation of performance from object-making as the 'coming of age' of performance and referred to this evolution in terms such as 'performance in its adolescence' and 'its mature phase'.[6] This rhetoric unwittingly suited the evolution of performance and also of its very protagonists, who tended to move away from live art as they aged.

Among the protagonists of historical performance, only a few confronted the question of the preservation of the live component of past works. While most pioneers eventually retired from live art, Kaprow presents a notable exception, as his involvement in performance never waned. Early in his career, he had laid the groundwork for the future of his works by ensuring that they could be repeated. For example, on the occasion of the exhibition 'Precedings', held in Arlington in 1988, he put on a number of new versions of his performances, among them *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), from which the term 'happening' originated. These new iterations authorized some degrees of interpretation, thus allowing the works to morph and to adapt to new situations and

4 Marina Abramović and James Kaplan, *Walk through Walls: A Memoir* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 119.

5 RoseLee Goldberg, 'Performance: The Golden Years', in *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (New York: Dutton, 1984), pp. 71–94.

6 Wayne Enstice, 'Performance's Art Coming of Age', in *The Art of Performance*, ed. by Battcock and Nickas, pp. 142–56.

performers. 'By deciding in favour of reinventions rather than reenactments,' writes Stephanie Rosenthal, 'he was guiding his work in a direction that could be sustained even in his absence.'[7]

Like Kaprow, Abramović's commitment to performance was sustained throughout her career. From 1981 to 1987, her practice was dominated by *Nightsea Crossing*, a performance that she presented with Ulay across the globe. After the two artists separated as both life and work partners in 1988, the afterlife of her performances became a central concern of hers. This question materialized in *The Biography*, a work first presented in Madrid in 1992 and then elsewhere until 1994. Conceived in collaboration with Charles Atlas, this new live piece adopted theatre conventions, signalling a dramatic departure from what had been Abramović's precepts up until that point. Presented on a stage, it did not adhere to the real time (and space) principle that her original performances had followed. Unorthodoxly, it was recounting her past.In *The Biography*, Abramović's life was narrated year by year, and, for the first time, past performances were partially reenacted. Works were recreated in shorter versions focusing on key moments: for example, the cutting of a star on her belly with a razor blade in *Thomas Lips* (1975). When it came to performances originally conceived with Ulay, such as *Relation in Time* (1977), during which the pair had their hair tied together for seventeen hours, Abramović recreated them with the help of slides projected onto two screens, one performer displayed on each side. The show was, the artist explained, a 'theatre piece in which I [was] actually playing myself'.[8]

While *The Biography* told the story of Abramović's existence, it also staged the very process of accounting for the past. As pivotal moments of her career were narrated by her own recorded voice coming from offstage, she presented herself as taking responsibility for cataloguing, and ultimately historicizing, her career. The fact that she assumed the roles of both artist and historian was also reflected in the title of the piece. Since a biography implies a second party undertaking

7 Stephanie Rosenthal, 'Agency for Action', in *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life*, ed. by Eva Meyer-Hermann, Andrew Perchuk, and Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), pp. 56–71 (p. 62).

8 Marina Abramović in Thomas McEvilley, 'Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?', in *Marina Abramović: Artist Body: Performances 1969–1998*, ed. by Emanuela Belloni (Milan: Charta, 1998), pp. 14–25 (p. 17).

Figure 1. Marina Abramović, *The Biography*, Theatrical performance, Kunsthalle, Vienna, Austria, 1992. Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives.

the job of an historian, the title is tellingly inaccurate for what is, in effect, an autobiography.

By setting the ground for the future of performance, *The Biography* made the problem of the transmission of the memory of past performance very explicit. Mannheim has explained that, although cultural heritage is usually incorporated in the present unconsciously and unnoticed, patterns of behaviour can also be adopted consciously as models, as a 'guide for action'.[9] He writes, 'We are directly aware primarily of those aspects of our culture which have become subject to reflection; and these contain only those elements which in the course of development have somehow, at some point, become problematical.'[10]

Reenactments did not just place Abramović's past works at the core of *The Biography*; they also explored the very possibility of their continuation in the future. In fact, Abramović's intention at the time

9 Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', p. 295.

10 Ibid., pp. 295–96.

was to continue presenting *The Biography*, in regularly updated versions, for the rest of her life (in 2004 she would present a piece, *The Biography Remix*, conceived in the same vein). In addition, she gave unprecedented credence to the possibilities of reenactment with the idea, formed shortly after putting on *The Biography*, of interpreting performances by other artists.[11] This project would only materialize in 2005 in the seminal *Seven Easy Pieces*, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where she reenacted works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, VALIE EXPORT, Gina Pane, and Joseph Beuys. By making the legacy of her own work and that of others 'subject to reflection', Abramović tackled the question of the memory of live performance, which was often swept under the carpet by the existence of documentation.

Young artists emerging in the 1990s were confronted, Abramović asserted in 1997, with 'so much mystification about the 1970s and also a short historical memory'.[12] Not only was the history of performance galvanized by its utter radicality, but it was still relatively fragmentary, with the book *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present*, written in 1979 by Goldberg, being one of the only comprehensive accounts of the subject.[13] In addition, while in 1993 Peggy Phelan insisted on the 'maniacally charged present' of performance, documentation of past events such as photographs, films, and relics remained the staple of exhibitions on this topic.[14] Young artists engaging with the legacy of performance grappled with a history which was exposed to both idealization and ossification. However, this history could be key to their own appearance as artists. For example, Tania Bruguera's art education culminated in her exhibition 'Ana Mendieta/Tania Bruguera', held at Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales in Havana in 1992. In this exhibition, Bruguera performed works by Mendieta, such as *Body Tracks* (1974), and came into existence as an artist through the persona of the Cuban-American artist.

11 See, for example, Guy Hilton, 'Fifty Is Just the Beginning', *Make*, 73 (December 1996–January 1997), pp. 3–5 (p. 4).

12 Marina Abramović in Guy Hilton, 'Fifty Is Just the Beginning', p. 4.

13 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979).

14 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 148.

Takashi Murakami began reenacting past performances in 1992, at the outset of his career. After he trained in painting, his practice was at a crossroads; in the same year he created Mr. Dob, a character who would be emblematic of the spectacular take-off of his career a few years later. The works repeated by Murakami were originally presented by his namesake Saburō Murakami, from the group Gutai, in 1956, and by the Hi Red Center in 1964. In appropriating these works, he claimed the legacy of artists who embodied the 'golden years' of performance in Japan. This kind of appropriation of past performances, notes Catherine Wood, is akin to a 'rite of passage', which would punctuate the career of a number of artists in the 2000s. Alluding to Tino Sehgal and Rabih Mroué, among other examples, Wood notices that these artists making past works their own 'are not just pointing to past work, they are speaking from a subject position'.[15]

The performance by Saburō Murakami, *Breaking Through Paper Screens*, which was reenacted by Takashi Murakami, involves the artist walking through large sheets of paper mounted on frames, resulting in large holes. To perform this brief and intense action, the younger Murakami took great care to resemble the older Murakami, mimicking his round-framed glasses and distinctive haircut. With this reenactment, not only does Murakami make his artistic trajectory meet that of his forebear, but he also operates a close identification with him. This episode took place at a time of uncertainty in Murakami's nascent career, during a 'process of transformation, going from *nihonga* [Japanese painting] to contemporary art'.[16] He explains, 'I came up against this problem: gradually, as I made more and more works, I realized that I didn't really have an identity.'[17] Such a 'problem' is exposed in the overlap of identities that was enacted in his reiteration of *Breaking Through Paper Screens*: not only does he appropriate a work but also a persona. Crucially, this reenactment specifically cements an artistic filiation with the young artist that Saburō Murakami had himself been in the heydays of Gutai.

15 Catherine Wood, 'Re-make, Re-model', *Frieze Masters*, 1 (October 2012) <https://frieze.com/article/re-make-re-model-0 > [accessed 27 September 2019].

16 Takashi Murakami in Hélène Kelmachter, 'Interview with Takashi Murakami', in *Takashi Murakami: Kaikai Kiki*, ed. by Hélène Kelmachter (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2002), pp. 72–105 (p. 73).

17 Ibid.

Figure 2. Oleg Kulik, *Deep into Russia*, 1993. Courtesy Oleg Kulik.

A rite of passage also marks Oleg Kulik's early career, before he started doing the dog performances that propelled him to fame. In *Deep into Russia* (1993), Kulik's head, in his own words, 'penetrated the vagina of a cow in an attempt to be born anew'.[18] Although this action, which evokes a return to the womb, is comparable to an act of regression, it also suggests the act of being born. Kulik's early work is very much, he has explained, a 'reaction to Moscow Conceptualism, with its sectarian exclusiveness',[19] and this episode enacts his birth as a radical performance artist as much as it denies the legacy of his artistic milieu.

With *Deep into Russia,* Kulik claims his own artistic filiation by possibly making a reference, however obliquely, to Joseph Beuys. The German artist continuously emphasized the importance of reconnecting with a primitive state of being after his plane crashed in Crimea in 1944, and he was brought back to life by Tartars. Insisting on a lin-

18 Oleg Kulik, 'Artist's Notes on Performances from the Zoophrenia Programme', in *Oleg Kulik: Art Animal*, ed. by Deborah Kermode and Jonathan Watkins (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2001), p. 72.

19 Oleg Kulik, 'Return Tickets', in *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. by Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), pp. 50–57 (p. 56).

eage linking him to Beuys, Kulik's 1996 performance *I Love Europe but Europe Doesn't Love Me Back* is an obvious nod to *I Like America and America Likes Me*, which was performed by Beuys at the René Block Gallery in New York in 1974. When Kulik presented *I Bite America and America Bites Me* in the following year, he imitated the German artist by living in a cage set up for him in the exhibition space; however, in stark contrast to Beuys' interaction with a coyote in the original work, he impersonated a dog, in this way marking the performance as his own.

By taking ownership of the history of performance, artists demonstrated a specific awareness of their temporal relation to this history. This question was posed in not so dissimilar terms for art historians. 'I was not yet three years old, living in central North Carolina', writes Amelia Jones in 1997, 'when Carolee Schneemann performed *Meat Joy* at the Festival of Free Expression in Paris in 1964; three when Yoko Ono performed *Cut Piece* in Kyoto; eight when Vito Acconci did his *Push Ups* in the sand at Jones Beach' (the list carries on with other examples.)[20] Running through a number of performances in parallel with her own age development, Jones stresses the particular subjectivity with which the appreciation of past performance is pregnant. She adds, 'I was thirty years old — then 1991 — when I began to study performance or body art from this explosive and important period, entirely through its documentation.'[21] Jones wrote these lines when the history of performance was the object of new and unprecedented scrutiny among scholars. More recently, performance caught the attention of a wider audience with Abramović's exhibition 'The Artist Is Present' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. By then the designation 'grandmother of performance' had been adopted by the popular media, suggesting a longing for the family tree of performance to be drawn.

20 Amelia Jones, '"Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal*, 56.4 (Winter 1997), pp. 11–18 (p. 11).

21 Ibid.

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