

The Aesthetics of Performance Art An Annotated Reading List



Performance art is inherently diverse and diversifying. There are many reasons for this but most of them could be siloed into three categories—the conceptual, the aesthetic and the political. Conceptually, performance art democratizes the conditions of aesthetic creation and appreciation by raising new issues of ontology, meaning, and taste. Aesthetically, it expands the parameters of artistic expression by opening the door for new applications of the abject, the corporeal and the affective in art. Politically, performance art enables a multiplicity of responses to the normative paradigms of a capitalist, male-centric, colonialist world insensitive to the intricacies of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and race.

The present reading list seeks to create a pedagogical platform that will enrich our perspective on performance art and capitalize on its diversifying energy. The philosophical canon provides a fair start for the reconsideration of performance art and its importance, but lacks in specific topical engagement. This is why the reading list incorporates both foundational texts and lesser known ones. In terms of the latter, the list features writings from underrepresented precincts of philosophy, art history and art criticism—women, sexual and ethnic minorities and international scholars. From within philosophy, voices representing both the analytic and continental traditions are given their space. This inclusive method of selection reflects the belief that the study of performance art’s pluralistic ethos demands an equally pluralistic pedagogical approach.

The instructional plan below is structured around the main topics I have identified—the conceptual, the aesthetic and the political. Each of the three modules is subdivided into three respective thematic branches. Each thematic branch is introduced by some guiding questions and includes four readings: two primary ones and two supporting ones. The primary readings are dialogically positioned—the first in each pair serving as an example of a canonical position and the second as a relevant recent counterpart. The tension in each juxtaposition is motivated by the pedagogical merit of such staged comparisons—the curiosities they awaken, the classroom discussions they inspire, and the insight they yield. The supporting readings for each branch serve to contextualize the relevant issues and are presented under the subheading “Supporting Readings.” While the ordering of all texts is topical and intentional, most of the primary and supporting materials can be cross-referenced with those in modules and branches other than their own.

Module I Performance Art and the Conceptual Turn



1. Dimensions of Performativity

What is performance art? How did it come about? How it is different from other art forms? What is its relationship with the avant-garde?

Kaprow, Allan. 2003. "Nontheatrical Performance." *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Rev. ed. Ed. Jeff Kelley. Los Angeles: University of California. 163-80.

In this seminal text Kaprow blocks out the definition of performance art, or as he calls it "nontheatrical performance," by exploring the ways in which it is different from previous modes of art-making. His exploration starts with detailed descriptions of three approaches to nontheatrical performance—Wolf Vostell's happenings (interactive installations incorporating technology and the human body), George Brecht's events (participatory gatherings that usually follow a loose script), and Kaprow's own activities (live art performances that test the boundary between the artistic and the mundane). He then proposes a set of options for what might constitute art-making, from the most structured and historically determined to the most innovative and unhinged. The position he assigns to performance art is, ultimately, equally foreign to the scripted nature of theater and to the formal parameters of object-based art. Still, Kaprow believes that the performance artist's subversion of these traditional art forms is and should be based on conscious critical interrogation rather than an uninformed denial of their nature.

Davies, David. 2011. "What is performance art?" *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*. Malden, MA: Blackwell-Wiley. 206-209.

Davies' inquiry into the nature of performance art reaches two important conclusions—firstly, that a precise definition of performance art is largely out of reach and, secondly, that any understanding we currently have of performance art is necessarily historically bound. The first conclusion is Davies' response to the difficulty of locating a bundle of properties that are unique and exclusive to performance art. For example, while Kaprow insists on the non-repeatability of performance art works, there are many relevant works that we readily recognize as performance art even though they do not meet this by now outdated criterion. As to the historicity of our concept of performance art, Davies defers to RoseLee

Goldberg's and Noel Carroll's theories of the emergence of performance art. Goldberg and Carroll agree that the formative beginnings of performance art are marked by intentional resistance to traditional art, and scripted theater specifically. In the absence of a technical definition, Davies agrees with Goldberg and Carroll on a cluster of historically common tendencies in performance art—the provocative, the non-representational and the interactive.

Supporting Readings:

Heyd, Thomas. 1991. "Understanding Performance Art: Art Beyond Art." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 31, No. 1: 68-73.

Heyd defends the apparently self-contradictory notion of "art beyond art" and explains why performance art is the best instantiation of it. He disagrees with Peter Bürger's contention that the avant-garde has failed on account of its eventual re-employment into the pragmatics of life. For Heyd, the success of the avant-garde is too subtle on the terms of the avant-garde (no immediate revolution in our way of life is accomplished) but is perfectly recognizable in terms of art in general. The avant-garde does, gradually or not, push art into uncharted territories, i.e. beyond art as we know it. But, according to Heyd, this is nowhere more evident than in performance art.

Goldberg, RoseLee. 2001. "The Art of Ideas and the Media Generation." *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. New York: Thames & Hudson. 152-155.

In this brief historical note, Goldberg outlines the artistic response to the political upheavals of the 1960's. The general spirit of civic disillusionment offered the best conditions for the re-evaluation of art and its supporting social institutions. Not surprisingly, a new animosity emerged towards the objects of art and their claim to aesthetic pleasure. The farthest possible opposite, which many artists readily embraced, was found in conceptual art, which prioritized ideas, relations and experiences over traditional aesthetic categories. Goldberg sees performance art as a potent embodied application of these new artistic concerns, and thus as a rightful heir to conceptual art. Furthermore, each sub-genre of performance art—from body art to live sculpture to discussions and performative scripts—retains a conceptual core that finds its roots in that decade of strife and controversy.

Corby, James. 2019. "Failing to Think: The Promise of Performance Philosophy." *Performance Philosophy* Vol. 4, No. 2: 576-590.

In his essay Corby blocks out a disciplinary space for "performance philosophy"—a field of increasing interest and scholarly activity among continental philosophers, critical theorists, and their colleagues in art history and literary studies. Corby rehearses three intuitions about the potential of performance philosophy—that performance adds to our existing knowledge, that

it represents its own kind of thinking, and that performance philosophy might “transform our very ways of conceptualizing.” The timeline Corby surveys spans the history of western thought from Plato’s banishing of the poets, to Romanticism’s preoccupation with the value of literary failure, to the contemporary moment of hard disciplinary boundaries. What has persisted through all these upheavals is the assumption that propositional knowledge is separable from and more philosophically productive than the enchanted insights of art. Corby sees performance philosophy as the most natural and radical way to challenge this traditional dichotomy. The reversal that Romanticism attempted—to reimagine art’s propositional failures as philosophical advances—would be best served by a forward-thinking interdisciplinary mode of inquiry that takes both art and philosophy seriously.

2. Meaning and Performance Art

How do we understand art? What kind of meaning does performance art convey? What is conceptual art? What does art do for us?

Sontag, Susan. 1968. “Against Interpretation.” *Evergreen Review Reader 1957-1967*. Ed. Barney Rosset. New York: Grove Press. 661-665.

Sontag mines the history of philosophical aesthetics and art criticism for the reasons why interpretation has held us under its spell for the last two millennia. One such reason is our insistence on the form/content dichotomy and the vestigial prioritizing of content in the way we talk about art. Another reason is the discursive, and thus political, control that interpretation enables. A third reason is our willingness to sacrifice our unmediated experience of an artwork, and our sensitivity to an artist’s intentions, for the sake of interpretative success. To counter these “reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling” tendencies, Sontag proposes an “erotics of art”—a new emphasis on transparency, which favors description and appreciation over interpretation. This critical ethos does not only change the terms of conceptual engagement; it also opens the gates for creative approaches to art which explicitly challenge vestigial modes of meaning-making and meaning extraction. Even though Sontag does not specifically single any of these approaches out, performance art is arguably the most extreme of the potential candidates.

Jones, Amelia. 1999. “Art History / Art Criticism: Performing Meaning.” *Performing the Body / Performing the Text*. Ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson. New York: Routledge. 39-55.

Jones’ essay offers a critique of philosophical and art-historical interpretation. Her main contention is that attributions of meaning in philosophical aesthetics and art criticism are traditionally a manner of top-down bestowal—i.e. artworks are rendered intelligible by certain pre-established and often institutionalized conceptual paradigms. In this, the often unstable meanings of art works themselves are not only inadvertently lost but often even intentionally stifled. To

rehabilitate such meanings, and destabilize the homogenous discourses that try to contain them, Jones proposes a “feminist phenomenological approach... deeply invested in *performing meaning*.” What this amounts to is a newfound sensitivity to all aspects of art—the performative, physical, contingent, messy, gendered, theatrical, emotional etc.—that have been systematically marginalized by philosophers and art critics since Kant. There is, according to Jones, an intractable economy of desire that absorbs artistic creation into the cumulative enterprise of human interaction and, instead of sweeping it under the rug for the sake of stability, philosophers and art critics should engage this economy on its own tentative terms.

Supporting Readings:

Lewitt, Sol. 1967. “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.” *Artforum* Vol. 10.

Lewitt’s text is at once a manifesto of conceptual art and a painstaking disambiguation of its parameters. Since he recognizes the artist’s idea as the vehicle and the limit of a work’s meaning, all non-cognitive types of content— aesthetic, plastic, emotional etc.—are intentionally left behind. Ideally, according to Lewitt, the conceptual artwork will not only communicate the artist’s idea, but also the process of acquiring, nurturing and developing the idea to its final version. This communication is no guarantee for the artwork’s success in terms of conveying the artist’s intentions and/or understanding on the part of an audience. A further difficulty Lewitt recognizes is the irrational character of conceptual art. For him, such art follows the logic of intuition instead of any pre-established patterns of reasoning. Through this, and through its utter disregard for traditional aesthetic experience, conceptual art earns a radical and revolutionary status.

Goldblatt, David. 2011. “Taking Art Personally: Austin, Performatives and Art.” *Contemporary Aesthetics* Vol. 9.

Goldblatt studies the connection between J.L. Austin’s speech act theory and art appreciation. The two commonalities that emerge are, firstly, that both the felicitousness (Austin’s term) of a speech act and the public response to an artwork are context-dependent and, secondly, that in both cases the personal dimension of content delivery and content reception accounts for discursive transgression and innovation. While J.L. Austin’s theory deals primarily with the potential to, in his formulation, “do things with words,” the implications of the theory are much farther reaching. The perlocutionary aspect of speech, for example, is understood by Austin as the force of a locution. But force, according to Goldblatt, is first and foremost a matter of transformative impact. It is the latter impact which coheres with the nature of aesthetic experience in the context of art. The importance of Goldblatt’s theory for performance art cannot be overestimated. Firstly, Goldblatt’s adaptation of Austin’s speech act philosophy to the context of art appreciation provides a bridge between two dimensions of

performativity—the verbal and the embodied. Secondly, Goldblatt’s emphasis on transformative impact describes both the intent and the expressive toolkit of much of performance art.

3. The Sanction of Taste

How do we form a judgment of taste? How does one acquire aesthetic authority? What is the difference between criticism and philosophy? How do we know what we like?

Shusterman, Richard. 1993. “On the Scandal of Taste.” *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art*. Ed. Mattick, Paul Jr.. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 96–119.

Shusterman’s text does not refer to specific art forms, but his arguments carry important implications for performance art and, specifically, its customary interrogation of the social. Shusterman revisits Hume’s and Kant’s respective approaches to aesthetics to demonstrate a fundamental, and fundamentally damaging, omission in each—their consistent disregard for the “social and class-hierarchical foundation of aesthetic judgment.” Even though Hume attributes the taste judgments we share to a commonality of sentiment, while Kant credits a commonality of cognition for them, both philosophers operate from an assumption of universality. In Hume’s case, this assumption runs afoul of his description of the “good critic.” The delicacy and superiority of judgment the latter exhibits are predicated on social distinction and refinement, qualities that are exclusionary rather than universalizing. In Kant, apart from his shift of emphasis from beauty in art to natural beauty, the same fundamental mistake reappears. Kant’s aesthetics relies heavily on what he designates “the free play of the cognitive faculties,” but Shusterman points out that Kant subjects this purported freedom to certain socially restrictive criteria, disinterestedness being the most famous and the most exclusionary of them.

Butt, Gavin. 2005. “Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism.” *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*. Ed. Gavin Butt. London: Blackwell. 1-19.

Butt’s text exposes the internal paradoxes of art criticism. The first and perennial one is the paradox of distance—even though the Enlightenment ideal of “critical distance” has been largely outgrown, the temptation to see art from outside remains with us. A second, and attendant, paradox has to do with the relationship between critical theory and philosophy on the one hand and art criticism on the other—while post-war theory and philosophy have acted as an enabler to the art critical enterprise they have also managed to limit it to an academically sanctioned zone of insight. Another paradox has to do with the tension between art criticism’s claim to discursive innovation (the introduction of new terms, new evaluative parameters etc.) and a simultaneous tendency to reactionary authoritarianism. Yet another paradox concerns art criticism’s political purpose—

as often incendiary as it is reactionary, and sometimes both at once. In light of these paradoxes, and against the backdrop of recent feminist scholarship and developments in performance art, Butt outlines two emancipatory strategies for art criticism—the continued subversion of established critical procedures and the incorporation of performative presence and personal responsibility in the act of critical engagement.

Supporting Readings:

Elkins, James. 2003. “The Philosopher’s Essay.” *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. 31-35.

Elkins traces the terms of contemporary art criticism and its relationship with philosophy. As philosophy withdraws further and further into academic obscurity, there is still the strain of commonality between philosophical and art critical discourse. Elkins uses Arthur Danto as an example of how embattled, and often contradictory, such commonalities can be. For example, while Danto’s philosophical proclamation about the end of art history has found purchase with artists, it is at odds with Danto’s own contributions to art criticism, bound as the latter are to art historical frameworks. For Elkins, the best way forward is a critical method that allows for a pluralist approach not only to art (as Danto would have it) but also to philosophy. The latter would require accepting various forms of art making and art criticism *as* philosophical in their own right.

Melchionne, Kevin. 2010. “On the Old Saw “I know nothing about art but I know what I like”.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 68, No. 2: 131-142.

Melchionne is an artist whose primary philosophical interest is the complexity of aesthetic judgment. In this essay, Melchionne approaches the analysis of taste from an unorthodox angle. While previous scholars have held onto, and/or implicitly endorsed, the belief that declarations of aesthetic preference are inalienably authentic to each person, Melchionne questions the reliability of these declarations and their introspective sources. To ask the question if we really know what we like is to address two dimensions of taste—the “aesthetic response” we have to objects of aesthetic quality and the “biographical taste” we accumulate over a lifetime of aesthetic experiences. One of Melchionne’s central claims is that the cultivation of taste requires our knowledge of both dimensions of taste *and* also the alignment of the two (where each individual aesthetic response links up to our biographical taste in a traceable manner). After a careful study of the epistemic reliability of our declarations of aesthetic preference, and our level(s) of awareness of them, Melchionne concludes that knowing what one likes is far from a foregone conclusion. This is a crucial step forward in our understanding of art controversies because it allows for an internal critique of controversy that is not predicated on art historical precedent. Melchionne’s focus is not on performance

art, but the implications of his theory for performance art and its often resistant public reception are immediately evident.

Module II Challenges to Traditional Aesthetic Categories



1. Beyond Beauty

Is the aesthetic always beautiful? What is the value of abjection and disgust? Why do artists inflict pain on themselves? Can pain and risk be instructive?

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. “Approaching Abjection.” *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press. 1-31.

The abject—expressed through the grotesque, the gross and the physically challenging—has long been a source of innovation and scandal in the art world. For Kristeva abjection accounts for much of the complexity of the human condition. She understands abjection to encompass various aspects of our humanity that are often seen as conceptually and/or experientially disparate—emotion, embodiment, affect, repression, criminality, hygiene etc. Kristeva’s guiding intuition is that the abject helps arbitrate between our perception of ourselves as subject and object. In the liminal space between the two, the “I” is experienced in its full heterogeneity to the frequent detriment of traditional ethical, aesthetic, and scientific considerations. This has direct bearing on performance art, whose history is marked by the deliberate departure from beauty and, concurrently, the constant renegotiation of identity between the extremes of subject and object.

Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 2011. “The Magnetism of Disgust.” *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press. 113-136.

Korsmeyer’s account of disgust and the role it plays in art appreciation starts with a treatment of what she calls the “paradox of aversion”—the apparent incompatibility between humans’ disposition to seek pleasure and their frequent voluntary exposure to unpleasant and even painful art-related experiences. Korsmeyer’s provisional solution to the paradox is based on the realization that pleasure is not an emotion but rather “an intense absorption in an object that induces us to continue rather than halt an experience.” This opens the possibility that the pleasure we take from a work of art retains a cognitive element such that we gain unique insight from what would, outside of the art context, have given us pain. Korsmeyer speaks of an “aesthetic conversion” whereby disgust and fear are transfigured into vehicles of absorption, and thus become aesthetically pleasurable. Since disgust and its magnetic force are of material interest to

performance artists and their critics, Korsmeyer's treatment of the paradox of aversion helps re-contextualize an important art historical issue.

Supporting Readings:

Pluchart, Francois. 1984. "Risk as the Practice of Thought." *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas. New York: E. P. Dutton. 125-134.

Pluchart's essay explores the dynamics and rewards of creative risk. He recognizes that art has been risky for many centuries—an artist is often prone to "bargain his safety against his ideas," hazarding public offense, censorship and even banishment. Still, Pluchart grants performance art the distinction of having introduced, from the 1960's onwards, mortal and mortifying risk of the bodily kind. Physical harm in the art context does not only change the grammar of art-making and aesthetic appreciation. It also, according to Pluchart, produces insight of an unprecedented kind—the mutilated body becomes a carrier of meaning or, as Pluchart calls it, a "coadjutant of thought."

Sigman, Jill. 2003. "Self-Mutilation, Interpretation and Controversial Art." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* Vol. 27: 88-114.

Sigman studies outrage and offense in the art context. The first important observation she makes is that, often enough, the public's recoiling from a piece of art comes with the assumption that the object of offense is interpretatively transparent. This is because in the absence of art-historical or theoretical wherewithal, we default to pre-conceptual reactions—fear of otherness, loss of our ethical bearings, low self-esteem etc. Since most historical offense-based arguments against art have made a claim that the particular work is demeaning to the public, Sigman carefully lays out the features of demeaning treatment—a mostly intentional act that treats persons as less than persons, usually in an abusive manner. On this description, very few artworks could be considered demeaning. Furthermore, as Sigman shows in her art-historical contextualization of artist Stelarc's performance work *Street Suspension*, public outrage could be tempered and/or extinguished through attentive engagement with problematic artworks.

Montero, Barbara. 2016. "Aesthetic Effortlessness." *Body Aesthetics*. Ed. Sherri Irvin. New York: Oxford University Press. 180-191.

Montero's essay takes a closer look at effortlessness in art. While this notion is considered outdated in contemporary philosophical discourse, Montero sees it lurking beneath most of our critical judgments of artistic grace, beauty and mastery. Effortlessness is aesthetically interesting because it applies to three major aspects of artworks—medium (through the alignment of the work's essential constituents), representation (through the conveying of the work's

subject) and process (through the success of the work's performance and/or presentation). Montero does not pay special attention to performance art but she makes provisions for "difficult" art and the ways it challenges entrenched expectations about the presence and value of artistic effortlessness. On the standard picture, artworks often appear effortless precisely because they manage to conceal how difficult they are to make. This model is disrupted by certain art forms—like contemporary dance and performance art—where deliberate effort is pushed to the forefront of the aesthetic experience.

2. Bodily Presence

Does the work of art have to be an object? What role does the human body play in art? Can the human body carry meaning? Can the body be an art medium?

Wollheim, Richard. 1992. "The Work of Art as Object." *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 787-93.

The human body has been present in art since the time of cave paintings. Still, in order to fully appreciate how and why performance art utilizes the body, one needs to break away from some established theories of materiality in art. Wollheim's theory of modern art takes the material nature of artworks as its point of departure. To see works of art as fundamentally physical, according to Wollheim, is a radical move because despite its obvious importance physicality has not been a central concern for art-makers and art critics before 1905. Modernist painting is Wollheim's prime example of the shift in artistic and critical priorities. In painters such as Henri Matisse, Morris Louis and Mark Rothko, the surface of the canvas becomes an active space of interrogation. The two axes that this interrogation follows are those between *material* and *medium*, on the one hand, and between *fact* and *use* on the other. In terms of the physical nature of a painting's surface, Wollheim credits Modernism with two resulting innovations—the treatment of the surface as medium rather than material, and the shift from taking the fact of the surface for granted to actively using the surface to one's artistic needs.

Vergine, Lea. 2000. "The Body as Language. Body Art and Like Stories." *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*. Trans. Henry Martin. Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A.. 7-27.

Vergine's account of the formative years of performance art takes stock of the many innovative strategies artists developed for re-engaging the human body. One of the crucial dimensions of this reengagement is the positioning of one's body in physical proximity with others. This happens in art through the bodily negotiation of basic dichotomies such as nature/artifice, ethos/pathos, agency/abandon, publicity/privacy, mortality/immortality etc. Vergine sees objects, and the body's undifferentiated objecthood, as active participants in the performative communication and communion between artist and audience.

These forms of togetherness stand or fall on the intensity of all parties' affective investment, but they are also equally affected by the level of intellectual mutuality an art work occasions. According to Vergine, the demand for intelligent analysis and deep understanding that performance art places on its audience is balanced out by the artists' bodily presence. For her the artist's body does not serve merely as a mechanical expedient. It also "contributes to the life of consciousness and memory in a psycho-physical parallelism of processes that assume meaning and relief only when they are connected."

Supporting Readings:

Goldberg, RoseLee. 2004. "The Body: Ritual, Living Sculpture, Performed Photography." *Performance: Live Art Since the 60's*. New York: Thames & Hudson. 94-127.

Goldberg sees the human body in performance art as a transmitter of erotics, gender tensions, cultural norms and political deviations. While two of the notable early works of performance art featured fully clothed male artists using naked female bodies (Yves Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* from 1960 and Piero Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* from 1961), the work of female artists like Shigeko Kubota and Yoko Ono addressed the gender imbalance soon after. Goldberg sees the recognition of the body as "prime, raw material" as one of the central accomplishments of performance art. Through numerous examples she demonstrates how this notion enabled a spectrum of physical signification—from regarding the human body as a mere lump of undifferentiated flesh to capitalizing on its biological intricacies. Because of the irreducible intimacy of shared bodily experience, all creative choices along this spectrum—from the disquietingly erotic, to the anachronistically ritualistic, to the viscerally sacrificial—have affected the way we see art and the world around us.

Demaria, Christina. 2004. "The Performative Body of Marina Abramović Rerelating (in) Time and Space." *The European Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 1, No. 3: 295-307.

Demaria's main contention is that performance art can be understood textually and representationally even if it does not lay an explicit claim to either type of content. She agrees with Judith Butler's notion of citationality as a perpetual re-inscription of power norms and codes onto the human body. Since bodily presence plays such an important part in most performance art, the question of the possibility of embodied meaning arises naturally. Demaria uses the art of Marina Abramović to show that the question should be answered in the affirmative. Abramović's body exercises discursive transgressions (of language and code) in ways that, according to Demaria, establish a new language of dissent.

Johnson, Dominic. 2019. “Those Who Have Suffered Understand Suffering: Notes on the Body (In Pain).” *Agency: A Partial History of Live Art*. Ed. Theron Schmidt. London: Intellect. 47-56.

Johnson explores the ways in which contemporary performance art questions our relationship with pain. Since pain is normally accepted as inalienably private, Johnson’s guiding assumption is that pain “provokes yet evades full representation and communication.” He thus sees live art that depicts pain or inflicts it directly as a creative attempt to socialize one’s inner world. This form of socializing, however, is also a form of resistance—pain becomes communicable precisely when it subverts traditional expectations of harm, suffering and healing. This, according to Johnson, presents a problem for contemporary art criticism. Since pain is not merely an aesthetic trope, it does not lend itself to the purity of formal intentions and analyses. The greatest challenge, for critics and audiences alike, is that the visceral reality of pain appears self-evident and self-explanatory but so rarely is. According to Johnson, performance art uses this difficulty to push against our socially determined notions of propriety, rationality, and endurance.

3. Direct Affect

Does art appreciation require distance? What role do emotions play in our response to art? What is wrong with sentimentality? Is wonder an aesthetic response?

Bullough, Edward. 1912. “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle.” *British Journal of Psychology* Vol. 5: 87-98.

Psychical distance is, at its most general, the sense of remove we have from a given artwork. For Bullough, psychical distance serves a dual function—it demarcates the parameters of both artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. Psychical distance is measured by the level of personal practical investment on the part of the artist or viewer. The higher the level of this investment is, according to Bullough, the harder it is for an artist to create aesthetic value or for a viewer to apprehend it. Bullough is quick to qualify that this formula does not have to sacrifice the possibility of non-pragmatic personal investment of the emotional, sensual or cognitive kind. In fact, the access artists and their audiences have to aesthetic value hangs in the balance between pragmatic and non-pragmatic concerns understood most broadly. While Bullough’s view is well aligned with Kant’s notion of disinterestedness, it remains reductive in terms of various art forms. The history of performance art, for example, is rich with cases where psychical distance is not only detrimental to an art work and its reception but, also, the artwork’s success is specifically reliant on visceral proximity.

Doyle, Jennifer. 2013. "Thinking Feeling: Criticism and Emotion." *Hold It Against Me*. Durham: Duke University Press. 69-89.

Doyle investigates the emotional dimensions of aesthetic experience in the context of controversial performance art practices. She focuses on sentimentality because it sits at the extreme end not only of the emotional spectrum but also, as a negative, on the art critical radar. Critics' charge against the sentimental is twofold—it enables vicarious experience at the expense of its direct counterpart and it gives a platform to the inauthentic. Furthermore, the overwhelming critical consensus is that the personal itself, manifested in sentimentality or otherwise, is inherently suspect. Emotion is thus framed as detrimental to "serious" art. It is also, and even more damagingly, feminized and drained of its political charge. To counter these assumptions, Doyle uses specific art-historical examples which reveal the richness and importance of emotional interest in the way art is made and experienced.

Supporting Readings:

Gaut, Berys. 2007. "Emotion and Imagination." *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press. 203-226.

Gaut mounts a defense of a view he calls "emotional realism," whose central tenet is that art audiences can feel real emotions towards fictional events without being irrational. On Gaut's understanding, most emotions have three essential features that mark them out from other psychological states—the affective (in response to a particular object), the cognitive-evaluative (as evaluation of the object) and the motivational (as a line of action/reaction one chooses to follow with respect to the object). Gaut also recognizes three reasons why emotions, thus understood, are possible in the context of artistic fiction. The first reason is the issue of responsibility that applies as fastly to emotions towards fictional events as it does to real events—without such responsibility there would be no use for, to give a traditional philosophical example, moral hypotheticals. The second reason is that we do, in fact, learn from our emotions towards fictional entities. The third and final reason is that real affective, cognitive-evaluative and motivational engagement is actually most often the reason we value the arts and the imaginative scenarios they immerse us in.

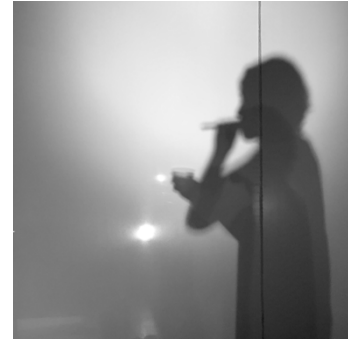
Prinz, Jesse. 2011. "Emotion and Aesthetic Value." *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*. Eds. Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie. New York: Oxford University Press. 71-88.

As a proponent of what he calls "naturalized aesthetics," Prinz focuses on the psychological aspect of aesthetic appreciation. His main claim is that an aesthetic response, be it positive or negative, is an emotional response. Prinz supports this claim with a variety of psychological studies. Most scientific findings he cites confirm unequivocally that emotions are tied to aesthetic appreciation in three

significant ways—they arise at the time of appreciation, they help shape our taste preferences, and appreciating art seems to be impossible without them. After answering a couple of possible objections to this view, Prinz settles for the type of emotion art appreciation most closely resembles, i.e. the feeling of wonder. Since wonder covers a fairly wide spectrum of experiences, Prinz introduces the concept of aesthetic wonder, which for him accounts for the specific stimuli and emotional responses we experience in the context of art spectatorship. This view is very promising in taking stock of the effect performance art has on its audiences— aesthetic wonder is a good candidate for a concept that explains both the lower level emotional responses to performative works and the residual rationalizations that emerge from them.

Module III

Performance Art as Lived Politics



1. The Art of Challenge

What makes difficult art difficult? What social role does art play? Is there value in difficulty? What makes performance art more controversial than other art forms?

Steiner, George. 1978. "On Difficulty." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 36, No. 3: 263-78.

Steiner's essay uses a short survey of the history of poetry to propose a preliminary theory of difficulty in art. He understands difficulty as a cognitive challenge, a confounding of expectations often resulting in misunderstanding. The four kinds of difficulty he outlines are the contingent (demanding further research on the reader's part), the modal (demanding a shift in sensibility from the reader), the tactical (signaling the presence and/or assertion of authorial idiosyncrasy), and the ontological (placing the parameters of the poetic enterprise in question). Since these difficulties test the limits of poetic intelligibility, Steiner's theory centers primarily on meaning, without addressing emotion, sense perception, political conviction and other possibly challenging aspects of aesthetic experience.

Bishop, Claire. 2004. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* Vol. 110: 51-79.

Bishop offers a critique of "relational aesthetics"—an approach to installation art that originated in the 1990's and whose main proponent and interpreter was Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud's chief claim is that the art movement in question promotes intersubjective relationships (between artist and audience members and among audience members alike) and privileges social and political cohesion over other possible aspects of the aesthetic experience. While Bishop finds this ethos applicable to the work of the artists Bourriaud chooses to discuss (Rikrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick etc.), she finds it difficult to reconcile relational aesthetics with the realities and concerns of the larger artworld. Antagonism is for Bishop just as viable a driving force in the making and appreciation of art as are social cohesion and intersubjective togetherness. Furthermore, as the history of early performance art and its reception shows, what makes art difficult, and thus politically important, is precisely the tensions that the makers and theorists of relational aesthetics attempt to quell.

Supporting Readings:

Diepeveen, Leonard and Timothy Van Laar. 2001. "Art and Difficulty: Foucault's Nightmare." *Art With a Difference: Looking at Difficult and Unfamiliar Art*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. 93-121.

In order to disambiguate the notion of difficulty in the context of art, the authors attempt a provisional definition of art. For them an artwork is, first and foremost, an object that provides cues of engagement and appreciation. We usually follow these cues—for example, our physical relationship with a painting as assigned by its frame and hanging—unconsciously, but they are essential for our understanding of the object as an artwork. According to the authors, difficult art often brings such instructions, and the presumptive parameters of artistic creation they outline, to the fore of our experience. Such is the case, for example, of minimalist art, where things the average viewer takes for granted—color, geometry, gravity etc.—replace what is commonly thought of as content. As should be expected, art becomes even harder to understand and/or accept when the explicit instructions it gives are unclear to the general public. For this, the authors recognize art historical knowledge as the only viable solution. Still, we are cautioned against attempts to remove difficulty altogether. There are four rewards of difficult art that justify its existence and propagation—it is unsettling and revolutionary, it illuminates the nature of art, it mirrors the difficult world we live in, and it helps us apprehend the limits of our own understanding.

Walker, John A. 1999. "Pole-Carrying Performance Arouses Derision." *Art and Outrage: Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*. London: Pluto Press. 79-83.

Walker documents the public and political outrage at a 1976 performance art piece titled *Circular Walk* by the collective Ddart. The piece's significance is that through media controversy it put performance art on the United Kingdom's cultural map. The performance itself consisted of three men walking for days along a giant circle (150 miles) with a pole attached to their heads, thus tracing what they saw as an immaterial sculpture through the land. While the art establishment found the work underwhelming, the public outrage was not based on art-critical or historical judgment, but rather on issues of public funding and pre-conceptual aesthetic responses. Still, in Walker's opinion, the controversy established the viability of performance art as a social and cultural barometer. It also made it clear that performance art's intentional remove from traditional art forms accounts for much of the negative response to it.

2. Identity and Complexity

What are the social dynamics of personal identity? What role does/should the artist's identity play in their art? Why is performance art inherently diverse? Do traditional identity categories undermine art or do they contribute to it?

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* Vol. 43, No. 6: 1241-1299.

The concept of intersectionality is Crenshaw's rich contribution to our embattled understanding of identity politics. To illustrate the danger of traditional identity groupings, Crenshaw turns our attention to the complexity of inhabiting two such distinct categories at the same time as a black woman. While it is true that a black woman can hardly be considered essentially black (on account of the primacy of men of color over women of color) or essentially a woman (on account of the primacy of white women over non-white ones), intersectionality does not aim to dismantle these general categories altogether. Instead, it seeks to introduce an ethical and political pragmatics of identity. The way Crenshaw proposes this should be done in the case of black women is by treating the two inherent identity categories—black and female—conjunctively rather than disjunctively as it has always been done. The resulting approach promises to improve our sense of the reality of "social location" and is thus of great value to all agents and processes of social health and justice.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. "Performing Disidentifications." *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 1-34.

The concept of disidentification is Muñoz' way of capturing the subversion of the token identities assigned by dominant cultural discourse. While this subversion is a common everyday practice for most members of minoritized groups, Muñoz contends that it is in art where it could achieve the political weight that leads to social change. One of the examples Muñoz uses is of gay Latino artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres whose work resists the dominant "representational economy"—it is not explicitly inflected towards and/or recognizable within the traditional symbolic parameters of sexual or ethnic marginalization. In fact, Muñoz sees Gonzalez-Torres' art as exemplary of "tactical misrecognition," i.e. the intentional obfuscation of pre-constituted identification. Performance art is the most natural medium for such misrecognition.

Supporting Readings:

Goldberg, RoseLee. 2004. “Identities: Feminism, Multiculturalism, Sexuality.” *Performance: Live Art Since the 60’s*. New York: Thames & Hudson. 128-145.

Goldberg provides a richly illustrated historical account of the intimate connection between identity and performance art. Starting from the feminist art of the 1960’s, the recognition and assertion of identity was a fundamental bid for social visibility. The next frontier was social recognition, which concerned ethnic and sexual minorities as much as it did women. The final frontier—political equality—is one that is still out of reach. Still, according to Goldberg, performance art continues to chart new territories of identification. In fact, while at the outset performance art used early feminist writing as inspiration, Goldberg recognizes a gradual reversal—today’s feminists are as likely to chart new philosophical directions as they are to follow the exploratory charge of their performance art counterparts.

Fusco, Coco. 1994. “The Other History of Intercultural Performance.” *The Drama Review* Vol. 38, No. 1: 143-167.

Fusco’s text chronicles the preparation, performance, and public reception of an artwork—“Two Undiscovered Amerindians”—she created in collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña in 1992. The performance was intended as a critique of the contemporary artworld, whose shallow redemptive multiculturalism often sidelined important issues of racial difference and racialized aesthetic perception. It consisted of the two artists spending three days in a golden cage presented, in the manner of live ethnographic spectacles of the not so distant colonial past, as members of an exotic and newly discovered island nation in the Gulf of Mexico. Fusco contends that otherness is always performative and, as such, has held the entire history of performance art—from the Dadaists to the present day—captive. The resulting frequent gestures of appropriation, condescension and erasure discredit the social and intercultural consciousness most performance artists see themselves as representing. Ironically, the strange journey the “Two Undiscovered Amerindians” project has travelled has plentifully confirmed the iniquities the two artists set out to expose.

Chan, Shing-Kwan. 2019. “Up Against the Wall: Contemporary Chinese Performance Art and the Great Wall.” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* Vol. 18, No. 5: 39-51.

Chan’s essay surveys the history of artistic responses to the Great Wall of China and its hegemonic cultural presence. The three such responses Chan focuses on are performance art interventions from the post-Cultural Revolution period—by the art collective Concept 21, He Chengyao, and Ma Liuming respectively. Each of these performances questions the historical delusions of stability and protection that the wall physically and metaphorically stands for. Chan recognizes the ways

in which the Great Wall has shaped the evolution of Chinese national identity over the last two millennia. And while the wall has seen its share of literary and visual interpretations, live art has proven especially apt at subverting its role in the creation and enforcement of dominant political narratives. The human body has much in common with the wall—they are both equally tangible in their physicality and equally spectral in their symbolic charge. The deployment of an artist’s body is thus intended as a categorical challenge. Against the wall’s ideological fixity, each of the three works posits identity as a space of negotiation. This is done through ritualistic action, nudity and gender transgression—testing the limits of social acceptance and reinserting individual human agency in China’s foundational script.

3. Civic Performance

What made Dada art revolutionary? What are the social parameters of performativity? What makes performance art especially politically powerful? Can art change our moral realities?

Berghaus, Gunther. 1985. “Dada Theatre or: The Genesis of Anti-Bourgeois Performance Art.” *German Life And Letters* Vol. 38, Iss. 4: 293–312.

Berghaus’s text provides a detailed account of the evolution of performance art and its relationship with politics. An important first step Berghaus recognizes was Hugo Ball’s idea of the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” the total artwork. While still under the spell of traditional theater, this idea laid the foundations for the Cabaret Voltaire, whose ecumenical approach to art-making and performance was best captured in the initial invitation to young Zurich artists to join the proceedings “regardless of their artistic direction.” Within this cauldron of creative enablement, poetry was liberated from the shackles of language, music from those of tone, and object-based art from its aesthetic tectonics. Berghaus notes that all these manners of subversion were not meant to just discredit prior art, but also, and more significantly, to help dismantle the social and political realities that academic art traditionally reified. This political premise also made performance art—ephemeral, confrontational and intense as it was—the natural medium for the Dadaists and their unruly offspring.

Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. 2013. “The Political Promise of the Performative.” *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. London: Polity. 140-148.

In this conversation Butler and Athanasiou explore the parameters of the public performance of political dissent. While many of the distinctive features of performance art are present in the examples they discuss—immediacy, interactivity, subversion of social and aesthetic norms etc.—these examples are not of artistic actions. They are, instead, instances of political protest that link up to Butler and Athanasiou’s shared sense of performativity. For the two of them, performativity is the aspect of our social life that manifests surprise, challenge

and urgency through the human body. This makes the performative an especially effective instrument against the disparity, dispossession and desperation the better part of humanity is forced to endure. That this instrument can be and is often employed to the same purpose by performance artists is a fact that Butler and Athanasiou readily acknowledge elsewhere in their sprawling dialogue.

Supporting Readings:

Lambert-Beatty, Claire. 2008. "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 33, No. 2: 309-327.

Lambert-Beatty explores the limits of art activism through a detailed account of Rebecca Gomperts' *Women on Waves* project. Starting in 2001, Gomperts—a physician with a background in art—sailed a customized maritime gynecological clinic with a crew from the Netherlands to the coastal areas of countries where abortion had been outlawed. The clinic would dock far enough from the shore (twelve miles being the limit of states' naval jurisdictions) to offer healthcare to local women undisturbed. Lambert-Beatty notes that for all of its political import, the project retains a radical imagination of the poetic kind. Considering its enthusiastic reception by the international artworld, and inclusion in major art exhibitions, it is also clear that Gomperts intended the work at least partially as art. And, yet, *Women on Waves* challenges notions of the aesthetic as the "retreat from the real" that it is so often seen as. Lambert-Beatty sees the pragmatic aspect of the work as an integral part of its beauty, and vice versa. This symbiotic balance seems to resolve the tension Ranciere finds "between the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all."

Walden, Kenneth. 2015. "Art and Moral Revolution." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 73, No. 3: 283-296.

In this article Walden studies the possibility that art can effect a moral revolution. Unlike most of his predecessors, Walden goes beyond the consideration of gradual change ("accretion") in our moral cognition—his study explores the conditions for a radical break ("reconfiguration") within the structure of moral thought. Walden's first example of such reconfiguration is the Cynic's performative approach to philosophical argumentation. And even if the latter is not art *per se*, it exists in the context of traditional artistic techniques and borrows liberally from them. It is, in fact, precisely the Cynic's artistically inspired subversions of philosophical argumentation that account for the fundamental disturbance to established cognitive and ethical structures. Walden's second example is at once more and less straightforward. In Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* Walden finds evidence of an overtly artistic approach to the reconfiguration of morality. And while artistic innovation is par for the course in the world of opera, the philosophical import of Wagner's work—an inspired shift from conventional

ethics to transcendental morality—marks the real step forward. The tentative conclusion Walden reaches in his analysis is that art is uniquely equipped to challenge traditional ethical discourse and thus help bring moral revolutions about.

Doutreligne, Sophie and Christel Stalpaert. 2019. “Performing *With* the Masquerade: Towards a Corporeal Reconstitution of Sophie Taeuber’s Dada Performances.” *Performance Philosophy* Vol. 4, No.2: 528-545.

Doutreligne and Stalpaert’s essay performs a “corporeal reconstitution” of Sophie Taeuber’s underappreciated contributions to the formative beginnings of Dada. The term, borrowed from French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, captures a twofold procedure of historical rehabilitation—rendering the artist’s body newly perceptible by attending closely to the photographic and textual record, and charting the “revolution in thought and ethics” that Taeuber bodied forth. Taeuber is directly responsible for the Dadaists’ first forays into movement and dance, even though it is the image of Hugo Ball in his stiff “Magic Bishop” costume that has been engrained in popular consciousness as the definitive memento of the Cabaret Voltaire. According to Doutreligne and Stalpaert, when Taeuber danced in a mask by Marcel Janco, wearing a costume by Jean Arp, and accompanied by a poem by Ball, she epitomized the clearest and most powerful version of Dada expression. But Taeuber’s contribution to the Cabaret was not merely aesthetic. Her uncanny dance also enacted a triple social critique—of the mechanical demands industry and warfare made on the human body, of the disciplinary strictures of traditional art, and of the powerful pull of parochial gender binaries.

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