



Performance Art

by Jeffery Byrd

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With an emphasis on action and time over object production, performance art is an enigmatic and controversial art form. Difficult to define and ever-evolving in scope, it is a forum where elements of many different artistic disciplines, such as music, dance, theater, literature, and the visual arts, may be melded.

Performance art has become an important site for the articulation of theoretical questions and issues in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century culture. Ephemeral in nature, performance art has been embraced by queer artists as a means of challenging the very idea of traditional in the arts and in the greater social and political sphere.

The fluid nature of performance art makes exact description impossible, but it is possible to discuss very broad characteristics and to describe its relation to other disciplines.

Characteristics of Performance Art

Performance art seeks to generate meaning from time and action. Rather than producing an object, the artist generates an event that may last anywhere from mere seconds to many years. This temporality is a radical challenge to traditional conceptions of painting and sculpture, which are generally created with permanence in mind.

Like music, performance art can be recorded but it often includes interchanges between artist and audience that cannot be fully captured in documentation. Once completed, a performance piece truly exists only in the memories of those who experienced it.

Unlike conventional drama, performance art does not usually employ plot development nor does it require suspension of disbelief. The artifice of theater is deconstructed as the emphasis is placed on the here and now.

Many performance artists have also been drawn to philosophical questions regarding aesthetic experiences versus ordinary life experiences. What is it exactly that makes something art rather than just a regular thing?

Many performance artists have explored the capacity of ritual and meditative attentiveness to transform the quotidian or simply appreciate the everyday in an art-like way. In some cases, the artist is the art; body and life are at once the subject and object of the art, both canvas and content.

Confronting Complacency

In the early twentieth century, performance art was used by groups such as the Futurists and Dadaists to address the turbulence of their times. Both groups exploited performance as a means of confronting



A photograph of Holly Hughes performing *Preaching to the Perverted* by Dona Ann McAdams. Courtesy Holly Hughes. Copyright © Dona Ann McAdams and Holly Hughes.

complacency.

The Futurists wished to free Italy from the shackles of the past by destroying the storehouses of history and embracing technology. Their desire to take art to the streets lives on in the protest work of such groups as ACT UP and Queer Nation. The Dadaists mirrored the absurdity of war with meaninglessness designed to agitate the bourgeois into action against Fascist aggression.

Raising Political and Aesthetic Issues

Between the world wars, performance art became an important aspect of the Bauhaus curriculum in the form of Oskar Schlemmer's theater workshop, which emphasized synthesis of all the arts. After World War II performance art became a testing ground for ideas concerning art and non-art, as well as identity politics and a host of other political and aesthetic issues.

In the 1950s, composer John Cage disseminated ideas about performance and interdisciplinary art. Through his teaching at New York's New School of Social Research and North Carolina's Black Mountain College, Cage influenced a great number of artists who went on to work in performance art. Cage and his life partner Merce Cunningham created some of the earliest interdisciplinary events that juxtaposed various media. Their work has served as models ever since.

The 1970s

In the 1970s, performance art truly blossomed as an artistic discipline. Fueled by the feminist interest in autobiography as a motivation for making art, performance artists addressed such issues as the body, race, gender, sexuality, and personal history. The West Coast became a hotbed of art and activism for women collaboratively creating performances focused on these ideas.

The connection between women and nature was also a prominent theme. Betsy Damon often covered herself with natural materials such as feathers and bark to express this relationship. In *7,000 Year Old Woman* (1977), she wore 420 tiny bags of flour. Positioned on a street corner, she slowly removed these bags and gave them to passersby, creating an image of woman made both powerful and vulnerable through giving.

Performance art was ideologically associated with other movements of the time such as earthworks and conceptual art in that it challenged the idea of art as a marketable commodity. The boundaries between media were breached in favor of a fusion between art and life.

The Fluxus Group

The Fluxus group, in particular, is known for exploring everyday life as art, often through symbolically rich rituals. Geoffrey Hendricks created several key works in 1971, including *Flux Divorce*. In this piece, Hendricks and his wife Bici Forbes affirmed their gayness by literally dividing their property. Their marriage certificate, double bed, love seat, and wardrobe cabinet were each carefully cut in half with scissors, ax, and paper cutter. Barbed wire entangled with other objects formed a barrier dividing their house.

Like many gay men, Hendricks married and fathered children in an attempt to lead a heterosexual life. This pretense is the subject of *Body/Hair* (1971), in which Hendricks shaved his entire body in a piece symbolizing rebirth and the shedding of pretense.

Hendricks' work of the 1970s reflects the transition of gay male identity in the post-Stonewall era, when queer people began more openly expressing their sexual identities.

The 1980s

The expression of queer content intensified in the 1980s with the founding of several important performance spaces. WOW Café and P.S. 122 in New York City provided an open atmosphere in which queer artists could tell their stories as performance art began to center on autobiographical narrative.

Responding to the heterosexist bias of the dominant culture, queer artists offered their own versions of the coming-of-age story, the love story, and stories of loss and mourning, the last spurred by the onslaught of AIDS.

While some artists included other media such as dance and video, the predominant approach featured the spoken word as a major element.

Holly Hughes and Tim Miller

This minimal style of performance remained prevalent throughout the 1990s, as artists such as Holly Hughes and Tim Miller explored the complexities of contemporary queer life.

In *Clit Notes* (1994), Hughes discussed her suburban Michigan childhood and her father's disappointment with her sexuality. In her text, Hughes balances wit and pathos as she weaves an analogy between her father's finding he has cancer in one kidney with finding that one of his two daughters is a lesbian. Losing one, she concludes, will not kill him.

Tim Miller similarly juggles levity and gravity as a means of connecting with an audience. In *My Queer Body* (1994), the audience is taken on a journey through time with Miller's body as a kind of map. The events related from his life each revolve around a certain part of his body, such as his forehead injured in a car accident after his first date with a boy in high school.

As Miller bares his soul, he also bares his body. For a portion of most performances, Miller appears nude. Both vulnerable and startling, his naked body seems a testament of facts behind the words he speaks, an undeniable presence before the audience.

Both Miller and Hughes create a special bond with their audience. By evoking common experiences (first dates, disappointed parents), they attempt to bridge the barriers imposed by sexuality, race, and gender. Through this commonality, they seek to create a safe space where difficult, painful, or subversive ideas may be broached.

The NEA Controversy

The taboo content of lesbian and gay desire, incest, and rape brought performance art into the limelight of controversy. In 1989, Hughes and Miller (along with John Fleck and Karen Finley) were awarded artist fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts for their work in performance. These fellowships were subsequently revoked because of political pressure from the conservative religious right.

A national debate ensued over free speech and governmental arts funding. The artists (christened the NEA 4) sued the government for reinstatement of the funds and received a settlement in 1993. However, the Clinton administration appealed the favorable court decision, wishing to let stand a "decency clause" that Congress had required be observed by recipients of NEA grants. In 1998, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the decency clause.

Recent Queer Performance Art

Queer performance art in the 1990s and the first years of the new century has remained focused on issues of identity, race, and gender. Autobiographical monologue continues in the work of artists such as Justin

Chin and Marga Gomez, who both delve into the intricacies of bicultural life. Their work is peppered with numerous pop culture references.

Mel Andringa (and a cadre of collaborators called The Drawing Legion) filters his own biography through the lives of famous artists such as Michelangelo, Jackson Pollock, and Grant Wood. His performances are part confessional and part art history lesson.

Andringa often creates a large scale painting in the course of a performance, as he presents facts that connect the lives of earlier artists with his own life. These "performed" paintings resemble works created by the artists being discussed but are often made from fragile materials such as water or chalk. The transient nature of these "masterpieces" comments powerfully on the lives of under-recognized artists and queer people in general.

Other contemporary artists have revived the idea of the body itself as artistic material. Ron Athey produces elaborate rituals that evoke both ancient blood rites and the terrors of modern medicine. His work features on-stage piercing, scarification, and drag queen nurses.

In *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1994), Athey sticks needles into his arm and scalp while describing his heroin addiction and attempted suicide. Raised as a fundamentalist Pentecostal, Athey evokes the spirit/body connection inherent in such traditional martyrs as St. Sebastian. Athey's work has also generated controversy through the use of his own HIV-positive blood in his performances.

Habeas Corpus (partners Mark McCusker and Darrell Taylor) also centers work on the body and all its functions, metabolic and metaphoric, often augmented and mediated through video and computer technology. In *Naked Camera Toss* (2001), the duo, joined by audience participants, play a game of catch with a video camera that projects images onto the gallery wall behind them. As the piece evolves, the running, sweating, breathing, and weight of the live bodies is contrasted to the clean, stark, weightless image created by the camera in flight.

Parody and Subversion

As queer artists have embraced the means to communicate to a wider audience, they have also critiqued the power structure maintained by the media. For example, the campy drag king ensemble Backdoor Boys spoof the inherent homoeroticism of popular boy bands. The group croons parodies of bubble-gum pop tunes while stroking their prosthetic penises. Marketed through the popular press and Internet, they have subverted the iconic status of popular media figures.

The ability to be both familiar and foreign is what makes performance art such a powerful tool particularly well suited to the queer community. Performance art is a practice as all encompassing as the community itself.

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About the Author

Jeffery Byrd, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.