



ON PERFORMANCE ART

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Abstract

Although performance art (one of the activities associated with the experimental theatre) has influenced, and has been influenced by, other theatrical activities (experimental and mainstream), very little has been written about it. This paper is a study of (a) its development from the late fifties to the present, and (b) its influence on other contemporary theatrical activities.

I

The surge of theatrical activities outside mainstream theatre since the 1950s is known broadly as "The Experimental Theatre". The experiments undertaken by this theatre - associated mostly with off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway in the United States, the fringe (theatre) in Britain, and the free theatre in Europe - have left their mark on dramatic art in the last thirty years.¹

These activities, in general, and performance art, in particular, have not, however, received the attention they deserve; critics usually dismiss them as "experimental".

It is not of course my intention to discuss all these activities here. This paper deals with one of them, viz. performance art, or rather contemporary performance art.

Performance art (known variously as "the art of performance", "live art", and "living art") is not new. Its origins go back to tribal rituals, medieval passion plays and Renaissance spectacles. Its history in the twentieth-century starts in Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. It more or less disappeared after the demise of the last of these movements,² and then appeared briefly in the late fifties and early sixties as "happenings". It came to the fore again, this time to stay, in the late sixties, with the short-lived student uprising of 1968, in the form of "conceptual art", which then developed into what Bonnie Marranca termed "The Theatre of Images",³ which in turn blossomed into theatre proper in the eighties.

Very little has been written about this art form. It is not surprising, therefore, that the publication of Rose Lee Goldberg's pioneering history *Performance Art*⁴ should prompt art critic Robert Rosenblum to write: "*At long last, someone has captured in print that most ephemeral of art forms - performance*".⁵ Contemporary performance art has affected, and has been affected by, other theatrical activities experimental and mainstream. In this essay, I shall, therefore, be concerned not only with (a) its development from the late fifties to the present, but also with (b) its role in relation to the experimental theatre and its traditional counterpart. It is difficult to define the term "performance art" accurately, but the question of definition and other related issues will also be considered in this paper.

II

Performance art is "live art by artists".⁶ In this kind of art, "performance" replaces "object" or "product", that is to say, instead of, for example, painting a

picture of, say, a tramp sitting on a park-bench and reading a tattered book, the artist asks a tramp to sit on a bench in a park and read a tattered book, and then invite people to come and see "the performance". Here "performance" (a real tramp sitting on a real bench in a real park and reading a real tattered book) takes the place of "object"/"product" (i.e. the painting). This example illustrates the simplest form of performance art. Complicated forms naturally require the use of diverse elements and of course need a good deal of planning and preparation. In this art form, the artist usually plays a great part in the execution of the work he seeks to present.

Like many terms in this and allied disciplines, "performance art" is not easy to define, Goldberg is certainly correct when in this connection she writes:

By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists. Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself. For it draws freely on any number of disciplines and media - literature, poetry, theatre, dance, architecture and painting, as well as video, film, slides and narrative - for material, deploying them in any combination. Indeed no other artistic form of expression has such a boundless manifesto, since each performer makes his or her own definition in the very process and manner of execution.

Since in this art form, the artist is more or less free to do what he/she likes, it is, as Goldberg implies here, no exaggeration to say that there are as many definitions as there are artists, hence the difficulty of formulating a prescriptive, or even descriptive, set of rules or criteria for measuring the excellence or otherwise of a given work. The problem of definition is compounded when we learn more about the nature of the work and the methods used to present it:

The work may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist⁸ him or herself or in collaboration, and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an "alternative space", a theatre, cafe, bar or street corner. Unlike theatre, the performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative. The performance might be a series of intimate gestures or large-scale visual theatre, lasting from a few minutes to

*many hours; it might be performed only once or repeated several times, with or without a prepared script, spontaneously improvised, or rehearsed over many months*⁹.

So much for definition then. The question that crosses one's mind now is: why does the artist abandon his traditional role of making a product (e.g. a portrait, a piece of music, a statue, etc.) and opt for something new - performance? There are three reasons for this change of attitude:¹⁰

- (a) the artist's desire to take his art to the masses away from galleries and museums; the idea is thus to appeal directly to a larger public;
- (b) to change people's notions of art and its relation to life; and
- (c) according to many of its practitioners, performance is "a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based".¹¹

Contemporary performance art - the subject of this essay - can be traced back to the first quarter of this century. A number of art schools - namely Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism - adopted "performance" not only to attract publicity to themselves, but also to test their ideas. Later they expressed these ideas in objects. This is particularly true of most of the Zurich Dadaists and most of the Parisian Dadaists and Surrealists. They dabbled for a while in drama and theatre using all kinds of means before making objects and paintings.¹² The excesses of these movements were later pruned by the Dessau Bauhaus in Germany - a teaching institution for the arts which closed down in the early thirties. In retrospect an authority on the subject points to the dual role played by this institution in reviving performance art and freeing it from politics:

*Performance had been a means for extending the Bauhaus principle of a "total art work", resulting in carefully choreographed and designed productions. It had directly translated aesthetic and artistic preoccupations into live art and "real space". Although often playful and satirical, it was never intentionally provocative or overtly political as the Futurists, Dadaists or Surrealists had been. Nevertheless, like them, the Bauhaus reinforced the importance of performance as a medium in its own right...*¹³

With the approach of the Second World War, there was a noticeable decline in performance art activities in Europe. For obvious reasons, these

activities stopped altogether during the war. Performance art, however, found a suitable climate in America. For, with the arrival of European war exiles, it began to emerge in the late thirties in the U.S.A. By 1945, it had become a recognized activity.¹⁴ But it was in the late fifties and early sixties that performance art, under the name of "happenings", became well-known to people in many countries in the West.

III

The "happening" is a mixed means presentation that "happens" without extensive planning and preparation. The term, coined in the late 1950s by the American artist Allan Kaprow, denotes *"a form of improvised or spontaneous theatrical performance, often of a non-naturalistic and non-representational kind"*.¹⁵ In addition to the traditional elements of acting and scenery and elements not different from the commedia dell'arte, "aural and visual effects may be juxtaposed and may include music, dance, film, stroboscopic lights, violent noises, even smells".¹⁶ Michael Kirby, an exponent of this theatrical form, defines "a happening" as follows: *"A performance using a variety of materials (films, dance, readings, music, etc.) in a compartmented structure, and making use of essentially non-matrixed performance, is a Happening"*.¹⁷ (In this definition, "a compartmented structure" is a structure which is made up of "segments", and "non-matrixed" means "formless".) In this "non-matrixed performance", Kirby explains, acting may be used, but it should not be "the primary element, as in a play".¹⁸ Happenings *"seek to 'overload' the receptors by the multiplicity of stimuli, thus wiping out intellectual grasp, aesthetic appreciation, and objectivity, but pounding directly on the emotions"*.¹⁹ Often occurring only once, the happening did not have a home. It happened anywhere. But when it did occur in a theatre, *"it took the form of an interruption to what was happening on the stage, ostensibly taking the actors by surprise"*.²⁰

In his book **Assemblage, Environments and Happenings**,²¹ Allan Kaprow summarizes the main points about happenings as follows:

- (A) The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.
- (B) ..The source of themes, materials, actions, and relationship between them are to be derived from any place or period except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu.
- (C) The performance of a Happening should take place over several widely spread, sometimes moving and changing locales.

- (D) Time, which follows closely on space considerations, should be variable and discontinuous.
- (E) Happenings should be performed only once.
- (F) Audiences should be eliminated entirely.
- (G) The composition of a Happening proceeds exactly as in Assemblage and Environments, that is, it is evolved as a collage of events in certain spans of time, and in certain spaces.

Some of these points need clarification. What Kaprow says in "A" is based on the view, held by the proponents of happenings, that all life is art. "B" shows that Kaprow does not want happenings to be judged by past aesthetic criteria. "C" points to the fact that happenings are not plays and should not therefore be performed in a particular place i.e. a theatre. "D" is related to "A" and "C". Here the idea is to free the artist from the limitations imposed upon him by time (2/3 hours) and space (a certain theatre).

Three kinds of happening evolved during the 1960s:

1. The technological happening: this form combines electronic music and art in an environmental/natural setting. Modern rock concerts held outdoors are good examples to illustrate the form.
2. The free-for-all happening: this kind of happening is usually roughly sketched out by the author. Two groups of people are required for its presentation: one to act (the actors are given instructions to do certain tasks), the other (invited) to watch and participate, if it feels like participating. A good example of the free-for-all happening is John Cage's **Theatre Piece** (1960).
3. The ceremony: in this type, which tends to combine elements from the technological and the free-for-all, there is no audience, because everybody takes part. The participants are given instructions to do a certain job or jobs. No improvisation is required here. Grose and Kenworthy cite Allan Kaprow's **Arrivals** as an example:

*unused airstrip, tarring cracks on airstrip, painting guidelines on airstrip, cutting grass at airstrip's edge, placing mirrors on airstrip, watching for reflections of planes*²².

Although, as indicated above, Allan Kaprow coined the term "happening", he was not the only person to think of this theatrical form. Jean-Jaques Lebel did similar work in France. Lebel's outlook was however different. Kaprow used the happening for artistic purposes, Lebel for political ends. Lebel's aim was to

shock and outrage the bourgeoisie. This he did by deliberately introducing forbidden elements (e.g. nudity, sex, sadism, scatology, drugs, etc.) into the happenings he presented. Advocates of the genre (e.g. Michael Kirby, Richard Schechner) tended to share John Cage's view that all life is art.²³ Lebel, who seemed to subscribe to this view, went a step further when he said: "Art is Shit" and should therefore be abandoned for revolution.²⁴

As a kind of performance art, the happening is not of course new, for, as indicated earlier, the basic principles of performance art can be found in Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism.²⁵ To these we should also add the German concept of "the complete art work" (**Gesamtkunstwerke**) championed by the Dessau Bauhaus referred to above.

Like any other theatrical form, the happening has its shortcomings. It tends to describe rather than comment on social aspects of life (it remained undirected and un-committed until it died a natural death). It does away with plot, climax and character without offering other elements to replace them. It presents details of everyday life without relating them to important issues and therefore robs them of any significance or meaning. To show, for instance, a woman chain-smoking and drinking endless cups of coffee, does not, from the artistic point of view, mean much, but if you relate this activity to something that happened to her, the activity becomes artistically significant. For without showing the connection that exists between a mundane activity and an important issue, the activity becomes nothing but repetition. - Although the phenomenon of the happening was a transient one, it heavily influenced all the arts especially pop art and the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. The "light show" which developed in the 1960s²⁶ and the environmental theatre no doubt owe the happening a great deal particularly its success in breaking "the stranglehold of narrative and of the proscenium arch", and abolishing "the separation between audiences and players".²⁷ The Living Theatre is also indebted to the happening for some of its techniques, namely audience participation, mixing reality with illusion, improvisation and the use of mixed media.

The appearance of happenings led to heated arguments on aesthetics in the avant-garde. Some of the questions raised were: could the theatre survive on improvisation? Was it necessary to use the written word as the foundation for theatre? Would the essence of theatre be completely redefined? And was Lebel right when he said: "Art is Shit" and should therefore be abandoned for revolution?

The avant-gardists began to respond. The Living Theatre, or the "mother" of all experimental theatre groups as critics call it, gave expression to its belief in the need for a revolution in one of its productions, **Paradise Now** (1968), and many of the experimental theatre companies (especially those associated with

the fringe theatre in Britain e.g. The People Show, the Pip Simmons Theatre Group, The Welfare State International) belittled the importance of the written word (i.e. the text).

Lebel's tendency to disparage art (as a means of accumulating wealth) and the political events of 1968 seem to have influenced many artists who, in the late sixties and early seventies, decided to dispense with art as an "object" (that could be bought and sold) and embrace art as "performance" (which could not be bought or sold, but could be appreciated). More of these artists appear below.

IV

After the death of the happening, performance art, under a new label - "conceptual art" - appeared. It "became accepted as a medium of artistic expression in its own right in the 1970s".²⁸ About this period in the development of performance, art historian Goldberg has this to say:

At that time, conceptual art - which insisted on an art of ideas over product, and on an art that could not be bought or sold - was in its heyday and performance was often a demonstration, or execution, of these ideas. Performance thus became the most tangible art form of the period. Art spaces devoted to performance sprang up in the major international art centres, museums sponsored festivals, art colleges introduced performance courses, and specialist magazines appeared.²⁹

"Conceptual art" appeared in the wake of the political events of 1968. These events³⁰ greatly affected the cultural and social life in the West. The prevailing mood among people was one of irritation and defiance. Students and workers showed their disenchantment with "the establishment" by shouting slogans and erecting barricades. In the world of art, the reaction came from the younger generation of artists in a less violent form. They began to question the established notions of art and attempted to redefine the meaning and function of art. As a result of this investigation, the art object became completely redundant, but the idea upon which it is based became of paramount importance. Within this aesthetic, "concept" superseded "art object" and "conceptual art" or the art of ideas (an art of which the material is not canvas, brush or chisel, but concepts) was born and reigned supreme in the last two

years of the sixties and the early seventies. There were reasons for rejecting the art object in favour of performance:

Disregard for the art object was linked to its being seen as a mere pawn in the art market: if the function of the art object was to be an economic one, the argument went, then conceptual work could have no such use.... although visible, it was intangible, it left no traces and it could not be bought or sold. Finally, performance was seen as reducing the element of alienation between performer and viewer - something that fitted well into the often leftist inspiration of the investigation of the function of art - since both audience and performer experienced the work simultaneously.³¹

To illustrate what these artists meant by conceptual art, some examples must be cited here. Daniel Buren expressed "pattern" of "conformity" in every day life in his work **Dans les Rues de Paris** (1968), when he hired a number of men to wear sandwich boards painted with stripes, and walk through the streets of Paris. Vito Acconci's **Following Piece** (1969) consisted of the artist himself following randomly selected people in a certain street until they entered a building. In -Marina Abramovic's **Relation in Movement** (1977), a man drove a car for sixteen hours in a small circle with Abramovic sitting next to him and announcing the number of circles completed over a loud-hailer.

To produce something new, the performing artist went as far as to inflict pain upon himself or endanger his life. Thus in **The Conditioning** (1972) Gina Pane wanted to illustrate the concept of conditioning and so she slept on an iron bed (without a mattress) under which a good number of candles burnt. Chris Burden went a step further when in **Shooting Piece** (1971) he asked one of his friends to shoot him in the left arm. Burden thought that the bullet would simply graze his arm. What happened, however, was that it blew away a large chunk of his flesh. In another piece, **Deadman** (1972), the same artist wrapped himself in canvas and lay in the middle of a very busy thoroughfare in Los Angeles, but a policeman arrested him for obstructing traffic.

In quest for originality, at least one performance artist tried the unthinkable together with the impossible. In **Conversion** (1970), Vito Acconci tried to hide his masculinity by getting rid of his body hair, pulling hard at his chest to produce female breasts (with no success) and concealing his sexual organ between his legs.

Some performing artists used entertainment techniques to express their concepts. Dennis Oppenheim's work **Theme for a Major Hit** (1975) consisted

of a puppet making endless quick and abrupt movements in a dimly lit room, accompanied by recorded music, and asking the questions propagated by the promoters of conceptual art in their attempt to belittle the importance of the art object and elevate performance to a higher position.

Some of these pieces, we notice, do not make complete sense e.g. **Dans les Rues de Paris** and **Relation in Movement**. In this respect, one can only say that the title reflects the artist's vision of the idea he seeks to portray. It should also be pointed out here that the artist does not usually explain the meaning of his work. In the examples given above, Buren, for instance, does not say that his piece is about "pattern" or "conformity". The work is performed in the streets of Paris and people are free to draw their own conclusions. It may mean "conformity" to some, but it may mean something completely different to others.

Another stage in the development of performance art was the creation of the so-called the "performance fringe"³² or the "Theatre of Images" referred to earlier, a kind of theatre dominated by visual images. Here the absence of the traditional elements of drama (e.g. plot, dialogue, character) emphasized the "stage picture", i.e. the visual side of theatre. For obvious reasons this theatre does not very much believe in the ascendancy of language. In this respect, Marranca points out that *"if this theatre refused to believe in the supremacy of language as critique of reality, it offered a multiplicity of images in its place"*, and goes on to say that the productions of this theatre *"exclude dialogue or use words minimally in favour of aural, visual and verbal imagery that calls for alternative modes of perception on the part of the audience"*, adding that *"this break from a theatrical structure founded on dialogue makes a watershed in the history of American theatre, a rite de passage"*.³³ In this theatre *"actors do not create 'roles'. They function instead as media through which the playwright expresses his ideas; they serve as icons and images. Text is merely a pretext - a scenario"*.³⁴ The text in the Theatre of Images remains an incomplete document of *"a theatre that must be seen to be understood"*. It is therefore frustrating to read the text, because *"there is scarcely a clue to its presentation in a script composed of bits and pieces of overheard conversations, television and films"*.³⁵ As the stress in the Theatre of Images is on the stage picture, *"tableau is so often the chief unit of composition"*.³⁶ The device is strikingly evident in the work done by the artists who believe in this kind of performance art. In his defence of the use of this technique, Marranca observes that *"the stillness of tableau sequences suspends time, causing the eye to focus on an image, and slows down the process of input". "This", in his opinion, "increases the critical activity of the mind"*.³⁷

Richard Foreman's **Pandering to the Masses; A Misrepresentation**

(1975) and his *Book of Splendours: Part (Book of Levers) Action a Distance* (1976) are good examples to illustrate this kind of theatre where the stress is on visual images. To emphasize the pictorial aspect of his theatre, Foreman presents actors and "objects" (i.e. everything else on the stage) in a series of stylized tableaux. "Aural tableaux" (i.e. loud sounds coming from surrounding stereo loudspeakers) accompany these visual tableaux. Here the performers and the VOICE (the playwright explaining, or commenting on, the action) keep "bombarding"³⁸ the audience with words and questions. Foreman's objective is "to penetrate the consciousness of the audience" and so "trigger off similar unconscious questioning" in them.³⁹ The following speech from **Pandering to the Masses** shows what Foreman means by bombarding the audience with words and questions:

VOICE: Oh Max, Max, Oh Max, Max, Max, Max, Max, Max, Max, Oh Max, Max, Max, Ohhh, Max, Max, Oh Max, Oh Max, Oh Max, do you want, Max, do you want, Max, do you want to be rewarded because you are such a good writer? Oh Max, Max, Max, do you want us to give you a reward?
(Max smiles and nods his head. Silence.)⁴⁰

The lines delivered by the VOICE here are not divided as we can see from this quotation. This is not the case in many places in the play. Buzzers, music (sometimes loud music) and heavy thuds punctuate the actors' words and occasionally the lines uttered by the VOICE. Stage directions, like the following, occur fairly frequently in the play, This example comes from the "prologue":

(Sentence interrupted by a buzzer, followed by loud music. The music ends with a heavy thud.)⁴¹

Robert Wilson's works furnish other examples to demonstrate the tendency in this form of performance art to stress the "stage picture". In his evaluation of Wilson's achievement, Marranca states that "*Wilson, who studied architecture and painted early in his career, has turned easily from painting canvases to creating living pictures on the stage*". Marranca then likens Wilson's theatre to that of Vassily Kandinsky (an earlier firm believer in the "poetization of stage space") when he remarks that Wilson's "*settings call to mind the early poetic and mystical theatre of Vassily Kandinsky who called his works "stage compositions" and each scene a "stage picture"*". "Like Randinsky", Marranca goes on to add, "*Wilson creates on stage a landscape of sculptured forms lit by the power of brilliant colours - a visual poetry of transcendent beauty and spirituality*".⁴² Innes seems to subscribe to all this when he declares that "*Wilson conceives his theatrical work almost exclusively*

in pictorial, visual terms, and indeed coined the term autistic' drama to describe it".⁴³ (Wilson's work deals mainly with abnormal mental activity,¹⁷ as hallucinations and fantasies and the individual's inclination to withdraw from external reality, hence the term "autistic drama.") In most of his plays, the accent is therefore not on words (his first work **Deafman Glance**, 1969, was completely wordless), but on the pictorial effects the play is expected to generate. This can also be said of his tendency to sacrifice time for the ulterior aims of the production. The first production of **Deafman Glance** took seven hours to perform and **Ka Mountain and Guardenia Terrace** presented at the 1972 Shiraz festival took about 270 hours (spread over seven days). Everything Wilson presents on the stage is given plenty of time to produce the impression he desires. At one point in **Ka Mountain** the only movement is a live tortoise crossing the empty stage. It took the tortoise almost an hour to do so. The aim of Wilson's work, according to Innes, is therapeutic:

to open the audience to "interior impressions", and the result is an audio-visual collage of dream-like and seemingly disconnected images, in which words and events are deliberately presented with obsessive repetitiveness and painful slowness.⁴⁴

As pointed out earlier, owing to the prevalence of dislocated discourse, reading the text of a play in this kind of theatre can be frustrating in the extreme. (One has to see the play to understand it.) This is especially so in Wilson's case. Consider the following extract from **A Letter For Queen Victoria** (1974):

(Curtain Up)

1 (SCREAM SONG)

1 (SCREAM SONG)

1 SHE BROKE HER NECK

2 THAT'S NOT WHAT I DID

1 OH YOU WERE

2 THANK YOU

1 YEAH WELL THAT STUFF

2 WERE THEY WERE THEY A... YEAH I KNOW

1 HAVE YOU BEEN HERE BEFORE?

2 NO, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME... OK, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

1 HAVE YOU BEEN HERE BEFORE?

2 NO, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME... OK, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

1 NO, GRACE, YOU NEVER HAVE TOLD ME ABOUT IT BUT SOMEDAY

YOU MUST

2 NO, I HAVE NEVER HANDLED A PROBATE CASE, I'VE TOLD YOU THAT

1 THANK YOU GRACE I MEAN YOU'RE NOT A COOK... YOU

2 I MEAN I COME HOME FROM WORK AND EXPECT A MEAL ON THE TABLE I MEAN A MAN IS A WOMAN

(ACT I, SECTION 1)⁴⁵

The passage, we notice, does not make sense. This is not the only striking feature of the play. Other conspicuous features include incorrect grammar and punctuation, a disregard for the conventional use and meaning of words, misspellings, repetition, echolalia, word play, imitation, and aural tableaux - the production begins and ends with scream songs (see extract above for the beginning of the play), grunts, shrieks, fabricated words like "pirup" and "spups" and natural sounds e.g. train whistles, horses' hooves, bomb blasts and gunshots - to say nothing of the fact that the performers have no names, and, as can be seen from the excerpt quoted here, are referred to by numbers. And yet there is meaning in this meaningless text. The cumulative effect of the myriad visual and aural tableaux points to certain themes and topics e.g. ancient civilizations, the American Civil War, murder, justice, ecology, the atomic bomb, pilots and a plane crash, cultural imperialism, and above all, human interaction. But again one has to see the play to understand it.

Lee Breuer's work is yet another example which sheds more light on the ramifications of the Theatre of Images. Breuer's **The Red Horse Animation** (1976) is regarded as one of the classics of the genre. It is however different in that it does not have a text, script or even outline. The piece is a series of sketches drawn in the manner of comic books. Moreover, the sequential order of the pictures does not readily yield any meaning, and if the reader goes through the sketches, he/she will get the impression that the work is nothing but a collection of funny pictures. It is not. For in it, Breuer *"offers a serious commentary on a fable for adults, in a form usually enjoyed by young people"*.⁴⁶ **The Red Horse Animation** is in fact *"a fable in which the Horse expresses his feelings about identity, his sense of time and space and an awareness of nature in a fragmented narrative that disregards temporal and spatial order"*.⁴⁷ Here the Horse recollects, in concrete and abstract images, scenes from his childhood, his sorrow at the loss of his parents, especially his father, the happy occasions he enjoyed nature, etc. On stage, three actors *"develop a series of choral narratives which pictorialize both anthropomorphic and abstract images of the Horse as he experiences life and recollects the past"*.⁴⁸

In discussing his work, in general, and Red Horse, in particular, Breuer tends to use "psychological" terminology. Two of the terms he uses are

relevant here: "motivational acting" is used to describe the "internal techniques" his group are "motivated" to devise for staging a given production, and "interior monologue" to refer to the method employed to explore "the consciousness of the Horse in **Red Horse**".⁴⁸

*"The Theatre of Images gave considerable importance to the psychology of making art".*⁵⁰ This explains why Foreman, Wilson and Breuer use psychological jargon terms to justify the use of certain methods of presentation. Whether or not their kind of theatre produces the results they claim is debatable, for bombarding people with a barrage of words and questions punctuated by numerous interruptions, in Foreman's case, or emphasizing what Innes smugly calls "obsessive repetitiveness and painful slowness", in Wilson's, is definitely not every spectator's, or even psychologist's, concept of the ideal theatre. (Not even old age pensioners have the time or the patience to spend sixty minutes watching nothing but a tortoise crossing the stage.) The use of "interior monologue", in Breuer's case, may remind us of the psychiatrist's couch, but using the technique from start to finish is conducive to boredom, if not handled with great care.

The Theatre of Images' preoccupation with the psychology of art may be controversial, but the fact that the visual side of this theatre is emphasized is certain.

In the eighties, performance art turned to mixed means and grand spectacle. The new work began to pay attention not only to decor, costumes, sets and lighting, but also to elements of the well-known vehicles of entertainment, viz. opera, theatre, vaudeville and cabaret. Dramatization began to assume a leading role in this kind of art. It therefore started to borrow freely from all dramatic and theatrical forms. By the mid-eighties it had become a theatre in its own right. In addition to mixing styles and means, the "new theatre" used music, dance, sound effects, film and something new, a fully-fledged script. James Neu's *Café Vienna* (1984) is an example of the new hybrid genre. Some productions of the new theatre were seen in performance art circles and on the theatre circuit, a mark of success. Spalding Grey's **Swing to Cambodia** (1984) is the classic example here. Commenting on this radical change in the boundaries of performance art, Goldberg writes:

Thus, the division between traditional theatre and performance became blurred, to the extent that even theatre critics began to cover performance, though until 1979 they had almost totally ignored it, leaving its reviewing to fine arts or avant-garde music critics. Nevertheless, they were forced to acknowledge that the material and its



applications had emerged from performance art and that the playwright/performer was indeed trained as an artist. For there was no comparable movement in current theatre to which the energy of the new work could be attributed.⁵¹

Striking examples of the new theatre are not difficult to find. In order to portray disturbed psychological states of mind, the Belgian artist Jan Fabre mixed a highly stylized kind of melodrama, sexual violence and imagery drawn from the art world (this appeared as backdrop-slide projections of well-known paintings) in **This is Theatre As It Was To Be Expected and Foreseen** (1983) and in **The Power of Theatrical Madness** (1986).

Called Nuova Spettacolarita by the press in Italy, the new theatre produced a number of works in which the Italian proponents of this hybrid genre (e.g. Falso Movimento and La Gaia Scienza) mixed film, architecture, music, dance, mime and mechanistic puppetry using outrageous costumes, outsized props, changing lights and folding sets. To emphasize the visual side of their production **Tango Glaciale** (1982), the Falso Movimento group designed a single theatrical space to represent the different sections of a house, a swimming pool and a garden. In **Otello** (1984), the same group used Verdi's opera as a starting point and not Shakespeare's play. However, the production, which turned the stage into a screen, with photographs, film and sets within sets, resembled neither Verdi's work nor Shakespeare's text. It was unique in that it stressed, through aural and visual collages, the elements of film and music (old and new, manual and electronic) in addition to acting. Besides the general ingredients mentioned above, La Gaia Scienza company used silent-movie slapstick in **Cuori Strappati** (1984).

Some of the founders of the Theatre of Images began in the eighties to adopt the techniques employed by the new theatre. Thus Richard Foreman - in collaboration with composer Peter Gordon, the painter David Salle and the writer Kathy Acker - created **Birth of a Poet** (1985), a teasingly humorous musical about sex and art in the eighties. In this production very bright lights, small golf carts (driven by the performers round the stage), monstrous costumes, and constantly changing sets (which changed every five minutes) were employed. The prolific artist Robert Wilson also tried his hand at the new theatre. His production **Great Day In the Morning** (1982), a collaborative effort with the great American soprano Jessye Norman, was a successful presentation of negro spirituals. For this work, Wilson designed a series of changing-tableaux whose function was to sharpen Norman's singing and provide the pictorial background needed for the content of his songs. Wilson's

The Civil Wars: A tree is best measured when it is down (1984), a collaboration with Philip Glass and others, was conceived as a grand opera, a twelve-hour spectacle which dealt with many historical themes and topics, presented many famous figures from history and a number of animals from Noah's ark - a tiger, an elephant, a zebra, and a giraffe. Another veteran of the Theatre of Images, Lee Breuer, was converted to the new theatre, and so, in association with Bob Telson and several African-American gospel groups, he staged his most widely-seen work **Gospel at Colonus** (1984), a mixture of Greek tragedy and American gospel songs. Another successful production should be mentioned here. In 1990, using the new theatre's techniques Breuer's company presented *Lear*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's play where the divine right of a king is replaced by money, sex, and racial might, and where the leading character is a woman, a matriarch living in the American South in the last decade of the present century.

The new theatre is more or less international and not a phenomenon peculiar to the United States of America. Goldberg adduces copious examples from Belgium, Italy, Poland, Spain, Germany, Holland, Japan, Australia and Canada, using the term "performance-theatre" to describe this new stage in the development of performance art. (I do not intend to duplicate what Goldberg has done in this regard. Therefore, for more on "performance-theatre" and the examples she gives from these countries, see pp. 184- 210 of her book.). Bim Mason writes in a similar vein citing examples of groups of performing artists from Britain (Forkbeard Fantasy), Holland (Dogtroep), and Australia (Stalker Stilts) and discusses their methods in some detail.⁵² It should also be noted here that some fringe theatre groups in Britain incorporate elements of performance-theatre in their productions. The Welfare State International is a good example. In their renowned production **Burning of the Houses of Parliament** (1981) and in their piece about the salt mines at Northwich in Cheshire, they lean heavily on techniques derived from the new theatre.⁵³

In its "conceptual" phase of development, performance art pieces were brief events, in many cases performed once and once only, which required no, or a few, rehearsals, and lasted from about 10 minutes to fifty. In the seventies, the ambitious works of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson were rehearsed for several months and ran from two to twelve hours. Wilson's longer productions (e.g. **Mountain** and **Civil Wars**) ran for days, as mentioned in our discussion of **Ka Mountain** above. In the eighties, like their traditional theatre counterparts, performance art works were likely to go through many rehearsals and generally speaking ran for about two/three hours. They also had repeat performances over long periods. In this respect, they were not different from the successful productions of mainstream theatre.

V

Performance art and the other theatrical activities associated with the experimental theatre have not only influenced one another, but have also influenced mainstream theatre.

The influence of the various experimental theatre groups can be seen in performance art works not only, as mentioned in many places in this paper, in their use of mixed styles and means, but also in the fact that in the first stage of the development of performance art, audience participation was a striking feature of many pieces. In Vito Acconci's **Telling Secrets** (1971), artist and "visitors" (audience) participated, and in his **Command Performance** (1974), the "viewers" (members of the audience) created their own performances. Certain pieces consisted of nothing but audience participation. In these, the artist would invite his visitors/audience to do a certain task. In one of these pieces, the Dutch artist Stanley Brouwn asked his visitors, in 1969, to walk slowly in a certain direction. Those who did found themselves in the countryside. In his instructions to them, Brouwn did not say anything about their destination or why they should walk slowly. (The point about walking slowly is that one should take one's time to enjoy nature. Thus, instead of making a number of pictures about the beauty of the countryside, the artist simply asked the people to go there and enjoy the beauty of nature.)

The influence of the experimental theatre can also be noticed in the proclivity of performance artists to use the method of "collective creation".⁵⁴ In this connection Robert Wilson is an impressive example, for his early productions - **The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud** (1969), **The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin** (1972), **A Letter for Queen Victoria**, and **Einstein on the Beach** (1976) - were all written in collaboration with the company.⁵⁵ The same can be said of Breuer's productions in general and the works mentioned in this essay in particular. His troupe - the Mabou Mines group - conceive, write, produce and stage all of its works collectively.⁵⁶ This is also true of the shows devised by Dogtroep. Mason, who has read their manifesto and met their artistic director, explains how they work and goes on to say that *"the workers are not divided into designers, constructors, musicians and actors"*. He then quotes the following statement from their manifesto to prove his point: *"All Dogtroep players are familiar with all the techniques used in the performance; the designers are the producers and the performers"*.⁵⁷ IOU are also known for their collective approach.⁵⁸ Steve Gumbley, one of the core members of the group, makes this abundantly clear in his notes on **The House** (1982). Under "Ideas", he says that these "can be developed through discussions by the

whole company" and then adds:

Individuals develop [their] own ideas and present them at regular meetings. Swapping and modifying ideas continues throughout the making of sets and objects. Performance ideas arise from made objects, music and the overall scenario. Final shaping and editing of the scenario occurs as late as possible...⁵⁹

Performance art is also indebted to the experimental theatre groups for devising the "transformation" technique *"whereby one object or character becomes another, as, for instance, in a piece where the performers were first parts of an aeroplane as it took off, and were then "transformed" into the people or the plane"*.⁶⁰ Wilson and Breuer made good use of "transformation" in the works discussed in this paper. In **A Letter for Queen Victoria**, only four performers play all the parts in the play, and in **The Red Horse Animation**, all the parts are played by three. This is natural in a theatre whose aim is not the creation of character or the presentation of a story. It is not therefore strange that the performer (who is usually numbered rather than named) should play more than one role in the production.

The influence of the experimental theatre companies on performance art can finally be detected in the fact that the focus in this art form - especially in the Theatre of Images - is on process. This kind of theatre is *"about the making of art"*,⁶¹ and so it is only natural that the focus should here be on the how. This does not mean that the what is not important, but it means that the how receives more attention. *"The result"*, writes Marranca, *"is a high degree of focus on process"*.⁶² This explains why reading any of the plays in this theatre does not make sense. You have to see the performance to understand the text. Now this is not different from what the experimental theatre groups of the sixties and early seventies were doing when they discarded the text in favour of some general notes or outline to guide them in staging their productions.

The contribution of performance art to contemporary theatre is twofold. First, it complements the work done by the experimental theatre groups of the sixties and seventies, many of which ceased to exist or simply drifted into mainstream theatre in the late seventies, because, as one expert in the field points out, the *"daring adventurousness"* of the sixties *"became less wild in the late seventies"*.⁶³ In the seventies and particularly in the eighties, the artist (meaning a practitioner of the fine arts, especially a painter, sculptor or musician) took over, for, as we have seen, he began to experiment widely with techniques mixing styles and means and borrowing freely from other disciplines

(but mainly from drama and theatre) in his attempt to create something really new. Second, like the experimental theatre groups of the sixties and seventies, performance art has added to the repertory of techniques now available to contemporary playwrights and directors. To give an example or two here: the use of mixed means and attention to the visual side of theatre. These elements can be very clearly seen in the musical theatre from **Hair** (1968) to **Aspects of Love** (1993 - where the stress is not on plot, characterization, or even dialogue, but on spectacle - and can be detected in serious drama in, for example, the plays of Heiner Muller (more of Muller below), Sam Shepard (whose work is out to depict *"rock music and the drug culture associated with it, which provides hallucinatory alternative realities, pop art and the indigenous rituals of the American Indians"*),⁶⁴ Peter Shafer (whose plays abound in "exoticism with striking visual and aural images" using "rites, mimes, masks and magic" in his attempt to emulate Barrault's "total theatre")⁶⁵ and Murray Shafer (in the **Patria** cycle of plays where the emphasis is laid on music, dance, elements of the opera, and on mythological pageants and the grandeur of nature).⁶⁶ These elements are also obvious in the productions staged by, for instance, Peter Brook (from **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, 1970, to **The Mahabharata**, 1985)⁶⁷ and Ariane Mnouchkine (especially in **Sihanouk**, 1985, and **Indiad**, 1987).⁶⁸

Muller did not only admire the achievements of performing artists, but he went as far as to collaborate with one of them, namely Robert Wilson. This is not the place to discuss Muller's plays in detail, but the fact that Muller (who does not speak English) joined forces with a performance artist (who does not speak German) and allowed him to stage his plays abroad (one of them, **Quartet**, was staged by Wilson in Muller's own country, in Stuttgart in 1986), and the fact that in his critical writings, Muller is full of praise for Wilson's work point to Muller's conviction that performance-theatre techniques do enhance his brand of drama which, like Wilson's, deals with contradictions, fantasies, and hallucinations.⁶⁹

(For influence and counter-influence in relation to "the happening", see Section III of the present study).

VI

A brief word on the future of performance art is in order at the end of this paper.

From the outline of its history in this century given above, one is bound to conclude that this kind of art has a propensity to appear for a while and then

disappear. The question now is: will it disappear again? Difficult to tell. There were, however, reasons for its disappearance in the past. In addition to mixing art with politics, the Futurists, certainly the Dadaists, and, to some extent, the Surrealists adopted unpleasant methods of presentation which did not endear them to the public. That is why the ordinary spectator did not take these movements or performance art (the vehicle they employed to test their ideas and publicize their views) seriously.⁷⁰ (Later, only connoisseurs, like the Dessau Bauhaus, appreciated performance art, devised methods of using it functionally, and, wisely, kept it away from politics.)⁷¹ The happening had its strong points, but it did not do well because of the defects inherent in its format and philosophy. (For more on the happening, its influence and its drawbacks, see Section III of this paper.) The emergence of performance art a few years after the demise of the happening is, as we have seen, different in that this time performance art has succeeded in establishing itself as a recognized medium of artistic expression. Nonetheless, staging performance-theatre productions is not plain sailing. Innes sums up the difficulties facing the performing artist when, in his discussion of Wilson's work, he remarks that *"it requires increasingly complex and expensive stage resources"*. A little later, Innes goes on to say that *"the reason for the cancellation of **Civil Wars** at the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival being the \$2.5 million required to stage the whole cycle"*.⁷² Although Wilson is a special case, because of the exceptional length of his works, there is some truth in what Innes says about cost and stage resources, for a performance-theatre production is in fact a combination of traditional theatre and spectacle, which is naturally more expensive to mount than its plain mainstream theatre counterpart, not to mention the stage equipment needed to produce the element of spectacle successfully. For these reasons, performance art may disappear again. If it does, its contribution to twentieth-century theatrical practices will not, and elements of performance-theatre will continue to figure in future theatrical productions, especially those which belong to the musical theatre.

NOTES

1. For more on "The Experimental Theatre", see the "Twentieth Century" in B.D. Grose and O.F. Kenworthy, **A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre**, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.
2. I say "more or less" because the Dessau Bauhaus in Germany continued to use performance in its productions until it closed down in the early thirties. More of Bauhaus below.
3. Bonnie Marranca dubbed this kind of performance art "**The Theatre of Images**". Marranca is the editor of **The Theatre of Images** (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), a collection of plays with introductory essays.
4. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, revised and enlarged edition 1988. **The date of the**

edition used in this study is 1990. Although Goldberg's book has 174 illustrations, it remains a string of undocumented notes on the genre. Moreover, it is written with the ordinary reader in mind. Its main drawbacks, however, are lack of criticism (one gets the impression that Goldberg is happy about almost everything performance artists produce), and the fact that it is written by an art historian and not a drama/theatre critic. Having said that, I must also say that, as a history of an uncharted territory, the book is extremely helpful.

5. Ibid., back cover of the 1990 edition.
6. Ibid., "Foreword", p. 9. This short definition is significant, because, as pointed out earlier, "performance art" is also called "live art".
7. Ibid, p. 9.
8. Bim Mason calls the practitioner of this form of art "performing artist" and not "performance artist", the term used by Goldberg here. See "Performing Artists" in Mason's **Street Theatre And Other Outdoor Performance**, London: Routledge, 1992. The present writer uses the two terms interchangeably in this paper.
9. **Performance Art**, p. 8.
10. See **Street Theatre**, pp. 74-77.
11. **Performance Art**, p. 7.
12. The interested reader will find more on the history of this period in Michael Kirby, "The New Theatre" in **The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature**, edited, with an introduction, by Richard Kostelanetz, Buffalo, N.Y. Prometheus Books, 1982, pp. 338-39.
13. **Performance Art**, p. 120. For more on Bauhaus in relation to performance art, see Walter Gropius (ed.), **The Theatre of Bauhaus**, Middletown, Connecticut, 1960, and Hans M. Wingler, **Bauhaus**, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969.
14. See **The Avant-Garde Tradition In Literature**, p. 339.
15. J.A. Cuddon, **A Dictionary of Terms**, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 302.
16. Ibid., p. 302.
17. **The Avant-Garde Tradition Litreature**, p- 328-
18. See Ibid., p. 334.
19. Joseph T. Shipley (ed.), **Dictionary of Literary Terms**, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970, p. 143.
20. Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), **The Oxford Companion To The Theatre**, (Fourth Edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 370.
21. New York: Abrams, 1958, see pp. 188-198.
22. **A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre**, p. 628. In **Dada: Art and Anti-Art** (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965). Hans Richter describes in great detail a much more complex happening of the ceremony variety in which he participated in New York in 1962, and in which he found similarities to Dada. For description and comment see pp. 212-13.
23. See Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner. "An Interview with John Cage", **tdr**, Vol. 10, Number 2, Winter 1965, pp. 50-72, See also **The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature**, p. 337.
24. See Jean-Jacques Lebel, "On the Necessity of Violation", **tdr**, Vol. 13, Number 1, Fall 1968, p. 105.
25. See **The Avant-Garde Tradition In Literature**, p. 338-9.
26. This was, generally speaking, a show which did not require elaborate planning or preparation. Andy Warhol's "Exploding Plastic Inevitable", is a good example of this kind of show.
27. Margaret Croydon, **Lunatics, Lovers and Poets**, New York: Dell, 1975, p. 88.
28. **Performance Art**, p. 7.

29. Ibid., p. 7.
30. See Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre*, London; Routledge, 1993, p. 209.
31. **Performance Art**, p. 152.
32. "Performance fringe" is the term used by Goldberg. (See **Performance Art**, p. 184). As explained in Note 3 above, Bonnie Marranca calls this kind of performance art "The Theatre of Images". "Performance fringe" should not be confused with the "fringe theatre" in Britain. The latter is used to refer to experimental theatre groups in the U.K.
33. See **The Theatre of Images**, p. X.
34. See Ibid., p. X-XI.
35. See Ibid., p. XI.
36. Ibid., p. XIII.
37. See Ibid., p. XIV.
38. See Richard Foreman, "Preface", **Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation, in The Theatre of Images**, p. 12.
39. See **Performance Art**, p. 186.
40. **Pandering To The Masses**, in **The theatre of Images**, p. 19.
41. Ibid., p. 15.
42. See Ibid., p. 44.
43. **Avant Garde Theatre**, p. 198.
44. Ibid., p. 202.
45. **A Letter For Queen Victoria in The Theatre of Images**, p. 55.
46. **The Red House Animation** in Ibid., p. 118.
47. Ibid., p. 116.
48. Ibid., p. 115.
49. See Ibid., p. XII.
50. **Performance Art**, p. 186.
51. Ibid., p. 199.
52. See **Street Theatre**, pp. 74-86.
53. For a critical study of the early productions of The Welfare State International, see Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds.), **Engineers of the Imagination - The Welfare State Handbook**, London: Methuen, 1983.
54. The following comparison sheds light on the process of collective creation:
In contrast with the prevalent 20th-century process of a playwright writing the script of a play in isolation and then depending on a company under a director to stage it, those companies using a collective approach create their productions autonomously through research, discussion, improvisation, writing, and rehearsal involving the entire group.
See **The Oxford Companion to the theatre**, p. 165.
55. **Performance Art**, p. 187.
56. See Iris Smith, "Mabou Mines's *Lear*: A Narrative of Collective Authorship" in **Theater Journal**, No. 45, October 1993, pp. 27g-301. See also **The Theatre of Images**, p. 113.
57. See **Street Theatre**, pp. 79-80.
58. The IOU company is based in Halifax. It was founded in 1976 by "a group of visual artists and musicians who wanted to work together exploring different ways of looking at paintings and sculpture and how these could be combined with music. Theatre was the appropriate medium". Ibid., p. 139.
59. Quoted by Mason in **Street Theatre**, p. 142.

60. **The Oxford Companion To The Theatre**, p. 614.
61. **The Theatre of Images**, p. XII.
62. *Ibid.*, p. XII.
63. See Martin Banham (ed.), "The Bush Theatre", **The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 139.
64. **Avant Garde Theatre**, p. 218.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
66. See *Ibid.*, pp. 230-33.
67. For details of these productions, see relevant chapters in David Williams, **Peter Brook: A Theatrical Casebook**, London: Methuen, 1988, revised and updated 1991. The book is a collection of notes and observations on the major productions directed by Peter Brook.
68. In this connection, Innes has some illuminating remarks on Mnouchkine's work. See **Avant Garde Theatre**, pp. 209-13. For a fuller discussion of her productions, see Adrian Kiernander, **Ariane Mnouchkine**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
69. The Muller-Wilson alliance is discussed in great detail in **Avant Garde Theatre**, pp. 198-209.
70. For a thorough investigation of these methods, see Michael Kirby, **Futurist Performance**, New York, 1971, and John H. Matthews, **Theatre in pada and Surrealism**, Syzacuse, N.Y., 1974.
71. See Note 13 above for relevant references on the Bauhaus theatre.
72. See **Avant Garde Theatre**, p. 209.

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