

# Performance Studies

An introduction

**"An immensely rich and rewarding guide to performance"**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *New York University*

**"Fully accessible, clearly written, well organized, and engaging"**

Philip Auslander, *Georgia Institute of Technology*



## 2 WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?

### What Is "To Perform"?

In business, sports, and sex, “to perform” is to do something up to a standard – to succeed, to excel. In the arts, “to perform” is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. In everyday life, “to perform” is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching. In the twenty-first century, people as never before live by means of performance.

“To perform” can also be understood in relation to:

- Being
- Doing
- Showing doing
- Explaining showing doing

“Being” is existence itself. “Doing” is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to super galactic strings. “Showing doing” is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. “Explaining ‘showing doing’” is the work of performance studies.

It is very important to distinguish these from each other. “Being” may be active or static, linear or circular, expanding or contracting, material or spiritual. Being is a philosophical category pointing to whatever people theorize is the “ultimate reality.” “Doing” and “showing doing” are actions. Doing and showing are always in flux, always changing – the world of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher **Heraclitus** (c. 535–475 BCE), who said, “No one can step twice into the same river, nor touch mortal substance twice in the same condition.” (fragment 41). The fourth term, “explaining showing doing,” is a reflexive effort to comprehend the world of performance and the world as performance. This comprehension is usually the work of critics and scholars. But sometimes, in Brechtian theatre where the actor steps outside the role to comment on what the character is doing and in critically developed performance art such as **Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s** (1955– ) and **Coco Fusco’s** (1960– ) *Couple in the Cage* (1992), a performance is reflexive. I discuss this sort of critically conscious performance in chapters 5, 6, and 8.

**Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–475 BCE):** Greek philosopher credited with the creation of the doctrine of “flux,” the theory that change is always happening. This is illustrated by his statement that “You cannot step into the same river twice,” because the flow of the river insures that new water continually replaces the old.

**Reflexive:** Referring back to oneself.

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1955– ):** Mexican-born bi-national performance artist and writer. His works include both writings – *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1993), *The New World Border* (1996), *Codex Espangliensis* (2000), and *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000) – and performances: *Border Brujo* (1990), *El Naftazeca* (1994), *Border Stasis* (1998), and *Brownout: Border Pulp Stories* (2001).

**Coco Fusco (1960– ):** Cuban-born interdisciplinary artist based in New York City. Collaborated with Guillermo Goméz-Peña on the performance *The Couple in the Cage* (1992). Author of *English is Broken Here* (1995) and *The Bodies that were Not Ours* (2001).

### Performances

Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – are made of “twice-behaved behaviors,” “restored behaviors,” performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse (see **Goffman box**). That training and conscious effort go into making art is clear. But everyday life also involves years of training, of learning appropriate bits of behavior, of finding out how to adjust and

**Restored behavior:** Physical or verbal actions that are not-for-the-first time, prepared, or rehearsed. A person may not be aware that she is performing a strip of restored behavior. Also referred to as **twice-behaved behavior**.

perform one's life in relation to social and personal circumstances. The long infancy and childhood specific to the human species is an extended training and rehearsal period for the successful performance of adult life. "Graduation" into adulthood is marked in many cultures and religions by initiation rites. But even before adulthood, some persons more comfortably adapt to the life they are assigned than do others who resist or rebel. Most people live in a tension between acceptance and rebellion. Social action – politics, protests, revolutions, and the like – are large-scale collective efforts either to maintain the status quo or to change the world. The whole span of individual human development can be studied "as" performance (a concept I will discuss later in this chapter). This includes large-scale events such as social actions, revolutions, and politics. Every action, no matter how small or encompassing, consists of twice-behaved behaviors.

## Erving Goffman

### *Defining Performance*

A "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute to the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions may be called a "part" or a "routine." These situational terms can easily be related to conventional structural ones. When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audiences or to an audience of the same persons.

1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,  
15–16



What about actions that are apparently "once-behaved" – the Happenings of Allan Kaprow (1927–), for example, or an everyday life occurrence (cooking, dressing, taking a walk, talking to a friend)? Even these are constructed from behaviors previously behaved. In fact, the everydayness of everyday life is precisely its familiarity, its being built from known bits of behavior rearranged and shaped in order to suit specific circumstances. "Lifelike" art – as Kaprow calls much of his work – is close to everyday life. Kaprow's art slightly underlines or highlights ordinary behavior – paying close attention to how a meal is prepared, looking back at one's footsteps after walking in the desert. Paying attention to simple activities performed in the present moment is developing a Zen consciousness in relation to the daily, an honoring of the ordinary. Honoring the ordinary is noticing how ritual-like daily life is, how much daily life consists of repetitions. There is no such thing as "once-behaved behavior."

**Allan Kaprow (1927– ):** American artist who coined the term "Happening" to describe his 1959 installation/performance *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Author of *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (1966) and *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993, with Jeff Kelley).

There is a paradox here. Can both Heraclitus and the theory of restored behavior be right? Performances are made from bits of restored behavior, but every performance is different from every other. First, fixed bits of behavior can be recombined in endless variations. Second, no event can exactly copy another event. Not only the behavior itself – nuances of mood, tone of voice, body language, and so on, but also the specific occasion and context make each instance unique. What about mechanically, digitally, or biologically reproduced replicants or clones? It may be that a film or a digitized performance art piece will be the same at each showing. But the context of every reception makes each instance different. Even though every "thing" is exactly the same, each event in which the "thing" participates is different. In other words, the uniqueness of an event is not in its materiality but in its interactivity. If this is so with regard to film and digitized events, how much more so in live performance, where both production and reception vary from instance to instance. Or in daily life, where context is impossible to perfectly control. Thus, ironically, performances resist that which produces them.

Which leads to the question, Where do performances take place? A painting "takes place" in the physical object; a novel takes place in the words. But a performance (even of a

painting or a novel, when treated "as" performance, a concept I will explain shortly) takes place only in action, interaction, and relation. Performance isn't "in" anything, but "between." Let me explain. A performer in ordinary life, in a ritual, at play, or in the performing arts does/shows something – performs an action. For example, a mother lifts a spoon to her own mouth and then to a baby's mouth to show the baby how to eat cereal. The performance is the action of lifting the spoon, bringing it to mother's mouth, and then to baby's mouth. The baby is at first the spectator of its mother's performance. At some point, the baby becomes a co-performer as she takes the spoon and tries the same action – often at first missing her mouth and messing up her lips and chin with food. Father videotapes the whole show. Later, maybe many years later, the baby is a grown woman showing to her own baby a home video of the day when she began to learn how to use a spoon. Viewing this video is another performance existing in the complex relation between the original event, the memory of parents now old or maybe dead, and the present moment of delight as mother points to the screen and tells her baby, "That was mommy when I was your age!" The first performance "takes place" in between the action of showing baby how to use the spoon and baby's reaction to this action. The second performance takes place between the videotape of the first performance and the reception of that first performance by both the baby-now-mother and her own baby (or anyone else watching the videotape). What is true of this "home movie" performance is true of all performances. To treat any object, work, or product "as" performance – a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all – means to investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings, and how it relates to other objects or beings. Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships.

# Bill Parcells Wants You to Perform

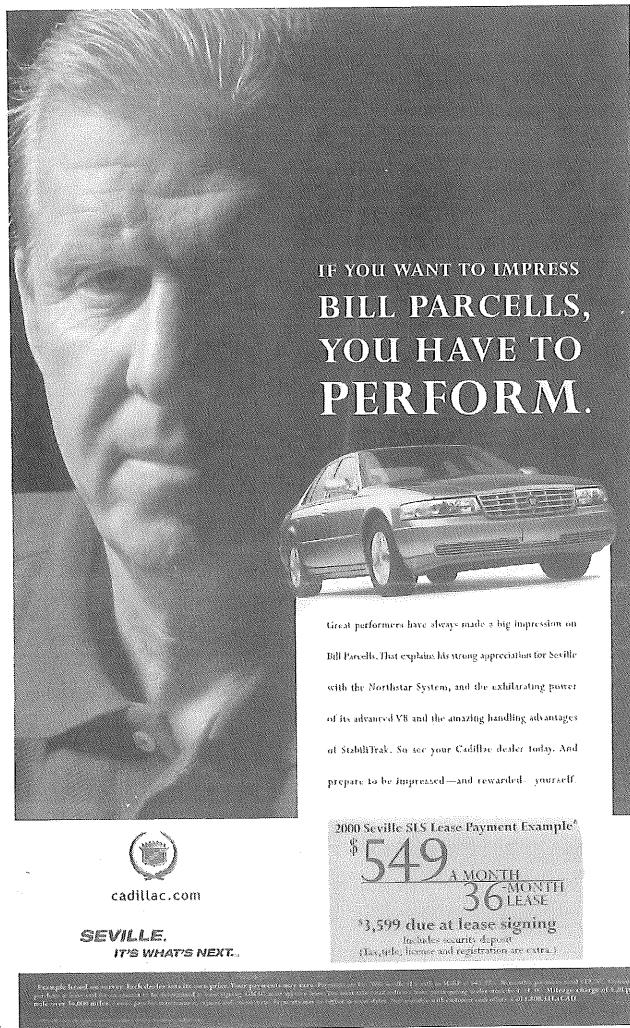
A 1999 full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* selling the Cadillac Seville car features American legendary football coach **Bill Parcells** (1941– ) staring out at the reader (see figure 2.1). One of Parcells' eyes is in shadow, the darkness blending into the background for the stark large white-on-black text:

**Bill Parcells (1941– )**: American football coach. Winner of two Superbowls (1987, 1991) with the New York Giants.

IF YOU WANT TO IMPRESS  
BILL PARCELLS  
YOU HAVE TO  
PERFORM

Underneath a photograph of a Seville, the text continues in smaller type, "Great performers have always made a big impression on Bill Parcells. That explains his strong appreciation for Seville [ . . ]."

The ad conflates performing in sports, business, sex, the arts, and technology. Parcells excels as a football coach. By making demands upon his players he motivates them and they



**fig 2.1.** Football coach Bill Parcells in an advertisement for Cadillac automobiles that appeared in *The New York Times* in 1999. Photograph courtesy of General Motors Corporation.

respond on the field with winning performances. Parcells' excellence derives from his drive, his ability to organize, and his insistence on careful attention to each detail of the game. His stare has "sex appeal"—his penetrating gaze is that of a potent man able to control the giants who play football. He combines mastery, efficiency, and beauty. At the same time, Parcells displays an understated flash; he knows he is playing to the camera and to the crowds. All of this informs the ad, which tries to convince viewers that the Cadillac, like Parcells, is at the top of its game, is sexy and powerful, well made down to the last detail, dependable, the leader in its field, and something that will stand out in a crowd.

## Eight Kinds of Performance

Performances occur in eight sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations:

- 1 in everyday life – cooking, socializing, "just living"
- 2 in the arts
- 3 in sports and other popular entertainments
- 4 in business
- 5 in technology
- 6 in sex
- 7 in ritual – sacred and secular
- 8 in play.

This list does not exhaust the possibilities (see Carlson box). If examined rigorously as theoretical categories, the eight situations are not commensurate. "Everyday life" can encompass most of the other situations. The arts take as their subjects materials from every what and every where. Ritual and play are not only "genres" of performance but present in all of the situations as qualities, inflections, or moods. I list these eight to indicate the large territory covered by performance. Some items – those occurring in business, technology, and sex – are not usually analyzed with the others, which have been the loci of arts-based performance theories. And the operation of making categories such as these eight is the result of a particular kind of thinking that is far from universal.

Even notions of history and culture are culture-specific, not universal. It is impossible to come at a subject except from one's own cultural biases. But once a project such as this book is undertaken, the best I can do is to be aware of, and share with the reader, this limitation. That having been noted, designating music, dance, and theatre as the "performing

Marvin Carlson



### *What Is Performance?*

The term "performance" has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature, and in the social sciences. As its popularity and usage has grown, so has a complex body of writing about performance, attempting to analyze and understand just what sort of human activity it is. [...] The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as "performance," or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. [...] If we consider performance as an essentially contested concept, this will help us to understand the futility of seeking some overarching semantic field to cover such seemingly disparate usages as the performance of an actor, of a schoolchild, of an automobile.

1996, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 4–5

arts" may seem relatively simple. But as categories even these are ambiguous. What is designated "art," if anything at all, varies historically and culturally. Objects and performances called "art" in some parts of the world are like what is made or done in many other places without being so designated. Many cultures do not have a word for, or category called, "art" even though they create performances and objects demonstrating a highly developed aesthetic sense.

Not only making but evaluating "art" occurs everywhere. People in different cultures all around the world know how to distinguish "good" from "bad" dancing, singing, orating, story-telling, sculpting, fabric design, pottery, painting, and so on. But what makes something "good" or "bad" varies greatly from place to place and even occasion to occasion. The ritual objects of one culture or one historical period become the art works of other cultures or periods. Museums of art are full of paintings and objects that once were regarded as sacred (and still may be by pillaged peoples eager to regain their ritual objects and sacred remains). Furthermore, even if a performance has a strong aesthetic dimension, it is not necessarily "art." The moves of basketball



**fig 2.2.** Ice skater Denise Biellmann does a triple toe-loop as seen in a time-lapse photograph, no date. Photograph by Alberto Venzago. Copyright Camera Press, London

players are as beautiful as those of ballet dancers, but one is termed sport, the other art. Figure skating and gymnastics exist in both realms (see figure 2.2). Deciding what is art depends on context, historical circumstance, use, and local conventions.

Separating “art” from “ritual” is particularly difficult. I have noted that ritual objects from many cultures are featured in art museums. But consider also religious services with music, singing, dancing, preaching, speaking in tongues, and healing. At a Christian evangelical church service, for example, people go into trance, dance in the aisles, give testimony, receive anointment and baptism. In African-American churches, the gospel music is closely related to blues, jazz, and rock-and-roll. Are such services art or ritual? Church authorities in medieval Europe such as **Amalarius** (780–850), the Bishop of Metz, asserted that the Mass was the theatre equivalent to ancient Greek tragedy (see Hardison box). Indeed, more than a few people attend religious services as much for aesthetic pleasure and social interaction as for reasons of belief. Composers, visual artists, and performers have long made works of fine art for use in rituals. In many cultures, participatory performing is the core of ritual practices. In ancient Athens, the great theatre festivals were ritual, art, sports-like competition, and popular entertainment simultaneously. Today, sports are both live and media entertainment combining competition, ritual, and big business.

**Amalarius of Metz (780–850):** Roman Catholic bishop and theologian, author of several major treatises on the performance of liturgical rites, including *Eclogae de ordine Romano (Pastoral Dialogues on the Roman Rite)* (814) and *Liber officialis (Book of the Service)* (821).

As noted, some sports are close to fine arts. Gymnastics, figure skating, and high diving are recognized by the Olympics. But there are no quantitative ways to determine winners, as there is in racing, javelin throwing, or weight lifting. Instead, these “aesthetic athletes” are judged qualitatively on the basis of “form” and “difficulty.” Their performances are more like dancing than competitions of speed or strength. But with the widespread use of slow-motion photography and replay even “brute sports” like football, wrestling, and boxing attain an aesthetic dimension that is more apparent in the re-viewing than in the swift, tumultuous action itself. An artful add-on is the taunting and victory displays of athletes who dance and prance their superiority.

For all that, everyone knows the difference between going to church, watching a football game, or attending one of the performing arts. The difference is based on function, the circumstance of the event within society, the venue, and the behavior expected of the players and spectators. There is even a big difference between various genres of the performing arts. Being tossed around a mosh pit at a

## O. B. Hardison

### *The Medieval Mass was Drama*

That there is a close relationship between allegorical interpretation of the liturgy and the history of drama becomes apparent the moment we turn to the Amalarian interpretations. Without exception, they present the Mass as an elaborate drama with definite roles assigned to the participants and a plot whose ultimate significance is nothing less than the "renewal of the whole plan of redemption" through the re-creation of the "life, death, and resurrection" of Christ. [...] The church is regarded as a theatre. The drama enacted has a coherent plot based on conflict between a champion and an antagonist. The plot has a rising action, culminating in the passion and entombment. At its climax there is a dramatic reversal, the Resurrection, correlated with the emotional transition from the Canon of the Mass to the Communion. Something like dramatic catharsis is expressed in the *gaudium* [joy at the news of the Resurrection] of the Postcommunion. [...]

Should church vestments then, with their elaborate symbolic meanings, be considered costumes? Should the paten, chalice, sindon, sudarium, candles, and thurible be considered stage properties? Should the nave, chancel, presbytery, and altar of the church be considered a stage, and its windows, statues, images, and ornaments a "setting"? As long as there is clear recognition that these elements are hallowed, that they are the sacred phase of parallel elements turned to secular use on the profane stage, it is possible to answer yes. Just as the Mass is a sacred drama encompassing all history and embodying in its structure the central pattern of Christian life on which all Christian drama must draw, the celebration of the Mass contains all elements necessary to secular performances. The Mass as the general case – for Christian culture, the archetype. Individual dramas are shaped in its mold.

1965, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, 39–40, 79

rock concert is very different from attending the American Ballet Theatre's *Giselle* at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. Theatre emphasizes narration and impersonation, sports emphasize competition, and ritual emphasizes participation and communication with transcendent forces or beings.

In business, to perform means doing a job efficiently with maximum productivity. In the corporate world, people, machines, systems, departments, and organizations are required to perform. At least since the advent of the factory in the nineteenth century, there has been a merging of the human, the technical, and the organizational. This has led to an increase in material wealth – and also the sense that individuals are just "part of the machine" (see figure 2.3). But also this melding of person and machine has an erotic quality. There is something sexual about high performance in business, just as there is a lot that's businesslike in sexual performance. Sexual performance also invokes meanings drawn from the arts and sports. Consider the range of meanings attached to the phrases "performing sex," "How did s/he perform in bed?" and being a "sexual performer."

The first refers to the act in itself and the second to how well one "does it," while the third implies an element of either going to extremes or of pretending, of putting on a show and therefore maybe not really doing it at all.

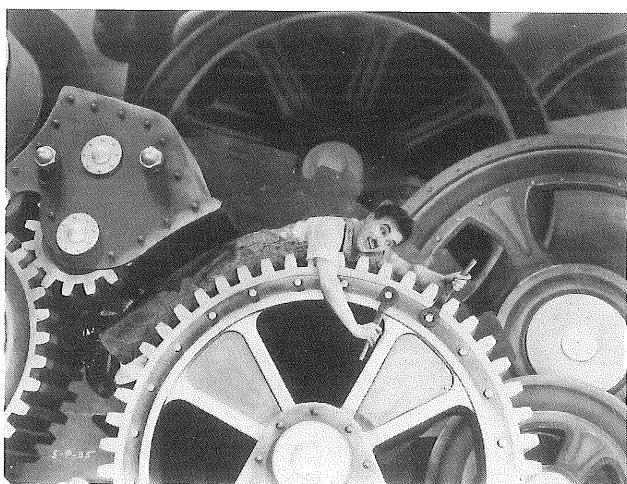


fig 2.3. Charlie Chaplin turning, and being turned by, the wheels of industry in *Modern Times*, 1936.

## Restoration of Behavior

Let us examine the notion of restored behavior more closely. We all perform more than we realize. As noted, daily life, ceremonial life, and artistic life consist largely of routines, habits, and rituals; and the recombination of already behaved behaviors. What's "new," "original," "shocking," or "avant-garde" is mostly either a different combination of known behaviors or the displacement of a behavior from where it is acceptable or expected to a venue or occasion where it is not expected. Thus, for example, nakedness caused a stir in the performing arts when it first was used in a widespread way in the 1960s. But why the shock, why was nudity new? Simply because the nakedness took place in "high-art" live-performance venues. Previously people saw naked bodies only at home or in gymnasium shower rooms. Naked performers were seen only in striptease shows. But this prohibition applied only to live naked bodies. Art museums were full of representations of naked bodies. The "cover" for this nakedness was that the art displays were presumed to be non-erotic. Of course, in many cultures nakedness is the norm. In others, such as Japan, it has long been acceptable in certain public circumstances and forbidden in others. By the year 2000 no one in any Western metropolitan venue could get a rise out of spectators or critics by performing naked. But don't try it in Kabul.

The habits, rituals, and routines of life are restored behaviors. Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (personal, social, political, technological, etc.) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while that truth or source is being honored. How the strips of behavior were made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. Restored behavior can be of long duration as in ritual performances or of short duration as in fleeting gestures such as waving goodbye.

Restored behavior is the key process of every kind of performing, in everyday life, in healing, in ritual, in play, and in the arts. Restored behavior is "out there," separate from "me." To put it in personal terms, restored behavior is "me behaving as if I were someone else," or "as I am told to do," or "as I have learned." Even if I feel myself wholly to be myself, acting independently, only a little investigating reveals that the units of behavior that comprise "me" were not invented by "me." Or, quite the opposite, I may experience

being "beside myself," "not myself," or "taken over" as in trance. The fact that there are multiple "me's" in every person is not a sign of derangement but the way things are. The ways one performs one's selves are connected to the ways people perform others in dramas, dances, and rituals. In fact, if people did not ordinarily come into contact with their multiple selves, the art of acting and the experience of trance possession would not be possible. Most performances, in daily life and otherwise, do not have a single author. Rituals, games, and the performances of everyday life are authored by the collective "Anonymous" or the "Tradition." Individuals given credit for inventing rituals or games usually turn out to be synthesizers, recombiners, compilers, or editors of already practiced actions.

Restored behavior includes a vast range of actions. In fact, all behavior is restored behavior – all behavior consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviors. Of course, most of the time people aren't aware that they are doing any such thing. People just "live life." Performances are marked, framed, or heightened behavior separated out from just "living life" – restored restored behavior, if you will. However, for my purpose here, it is not necessary to pursue this doubling. It is enough to define restored behavior as marked, framed, or heightened. Restored behavior can be "me" at another time or psychological state – for example, telling the story of or acting out a celebratory or traumatic event. Restored behavior can bring into play non-ordinary reality as in the Balinese trance-dance enacting the struggle between the demoness Rangda and the Lion-god Barong (see figure 2.4). Restored behavior can be actions marked off by aesthetic convention as in theatre, dance, and music. It can be actions reified into the "rules of the game," "etiquette," or diplomatic "protocol" – or any other of the myriad, known-beforehand actions of life. These vary enormously from culture to culture. Restored behavior can be a boy not shedding tears when jagged leaves slice the inside of his nostrils during a Papua New Guinea initiation; or the formality of a bride and groom during their wedding ceremony. Because it is marked, framed, and separate, restored behavior can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed.

Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive (see Geertz box). Its meanings need to be decoded by those in the know. This is not a question of "high" versus "low" culture. A sports fan knows the rules and strategies of the game, the statistics of key players, the standings, and many other historical and technical details. Ditto for the fans of rock bands. Sometimes the knowledge about restored behavior is esoteric, privy to only the initiated. Among Australian Native Peoples,



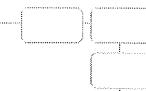
**fig 2.4.** The lion god Barong, right, does battle against the demon Rangda in Balinese ritual dance theatre, 1980s. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

the outback itself is full of significant rocks, trails, water holes, and other markings that form a record of the actions of mythical beings. Only the initiated know the relationship between the ordinary geography and the sacred geography. To become conscious of restored behavior is to recognize the process by which social processes in all their multiple forms are transformed into theatre. Theatre not in the limited sense of enactments of dramas on stages (which, after all, is a practice that until it became very widespread as part of colonialism belonged to relatively few cultures), but in the broader sense outlined in chapter 1. Performance in the restored behavior sense means never for the first time, always for the second to *n*th time: twice-behaved behavior.

## Caution! Beware of Generalizations

I need to emphasize a point. Performances can be generalized at the theoretical level of restoration of behavior. However, as embodied practices each and every performance is specific and different from every other. The differences enact the conventions and traditions of a genre, the personal choices made by the performers, various cultural patterns, historical circumstances, and the particularities of reception. Take wrestling, for example. In Japan, the moves of a sumo wrestler are well determined by long tradition. These moves include the athlete's swaggering circulation around the ring,

Clifford Geertz

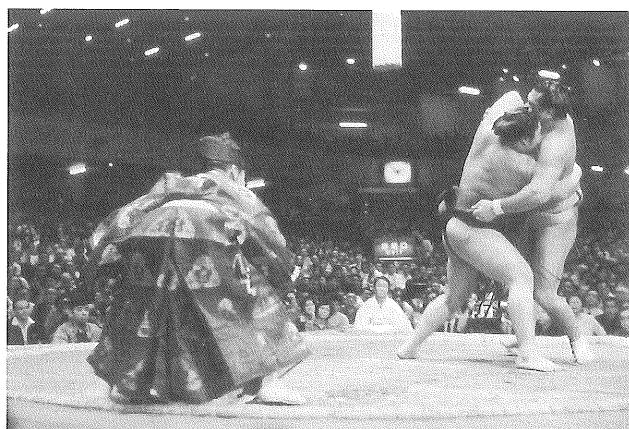


### *Human Behavior as Symbolic Action*

Once human behavior is seen as [...] symbolic action – action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies – the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. [...] Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior – or more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various states of consciousness; but these draw their meaning from the role they play [...] in an ongoing pattern of life [...].

1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10, 17

his adjusting his groin belt, the throwing of handfuls of salt, the eyeing of his opponent and the final, often very brief, grapple of the two enormous competitors (see figure 2.5). Knowing spectators see in these carefully ritualized displays a centuries-old tradition linked to Shinto, the native Japanese religion. By contrast, American professional wrestling is a noisy sport for “outlaws” where each wrestler flaunts his own raucous identity (see figure 2.6). During the matches referees are clobbered, wrestlers are thrown from the ring, and cheating is endemic. All this is spurred on



**fig 2.5.** Japanese sumo wrestlers grappling in the ring. The referee in ritual dress is in the left foreground. Photograph by Michael MacIntyre. Copyright Hutchison Picture Library.

fig 2.6

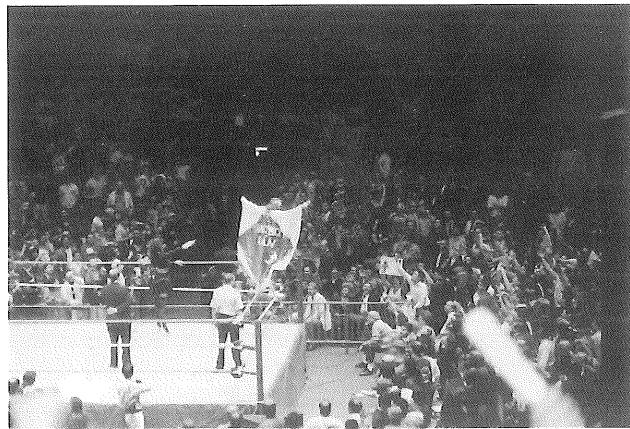


"The Road Warriors" professional American wrestlers posing with their manager. Copyright Superstar Wrestling.

by fans who hurl epithets and objects. However, everyone knows that the outcome of American wrestling is determined in advance, that the lawlessness is play-acting – it's pretty much "all a show." Fans of sumo and fans of World Wrestling Federation matches know their heroes and villains, can tell you the history of their sport, and react according to accepted conventions and traditions. Both sumo and what occurs under the banner of the World Wrestling Federation are "wrestling"; each enacts the values of its particular culture.

What's true of wrestling is also true of the performing arts, political demonstrations, the roles of everyday life (doctor, mother, cop, etc.), and all other performances. Each genre is divided into many sub-genres. What is American theatre? Broadway, off Broadway, off off Broadway, regional theatre, community theatre, community-based theatre, college theatre, and more. Each sub-genre has its own particularities – similar in some ways to related forms but also different. And the whole system could be looked at from other perspectives – in terms, for example, of comedy, tragedy, melodrama, musicals; or divided according to professional–amateur, issue-oriented or apolitical, and so on. Nor are categories fixed or static. New genres emerge, and others fade away. Yesterday's avant-garde is today's mainstream is tomorrow's forgotten practice. Particular genres migrate from one category to another.

Take jazz, for example. During its formative years at the start of the twentieth century, jazz was not regarded as an art. It was akin to "folk performance" or "popular entertainment." But as performers moved out of red-light districts into respectable clubs and finally into concert halls, scholars increasingly paid attention to jazz. A substantial repertory of



"Macho Man" displaying himself for his admiring fans. Copyright Sharon Mazer.

music was archived. Particular musicians' works achieved canonical status. By the 1950s jazz was regarded as "art." Today's popular music includes rock, rap, and reggae, but not "pure jazz." But that is not to say that rock and other forms of pop music will not someday be listened to and regarded in the same way that jazz or classical music is now. The categories of "folk," "pop," and "classical" have more to do with ideology, politics, and economic power than with the formal qualities of the music.

## "Is" Performance

What is the difference between "is" performance and "as" performance? Certain events are performances and other events less so. There are limits to what "is" performance. But just about anything can be studied "as" performance. Something "is" a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is. Rituals, play and games, and the roles of everyday life are performances because convention, context, usage, and tradition say so. One cannot determine what "is" a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. There is nothing inherent in an action in itself that makes it a performance or disqualifies it from being a performance. From the vantage of the kind of performance theory I am propounding, every action is a performance. But from the vantage of cultural practice, some actions will be deemed performances and others not; and this will vary from culture to culture, historical period to historical period.

Let me use the European tradition as an example to explain in more detail how definitions operate within

contexts. What “is” or “is not” performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and placed. Today the enactment of dramas by actors “is” a theatrical performance. But it was not always so. What we today call “theatre” people in other times did not. The ancient Greeks used words similar to ours to describe the theatre (our words derive from theirs), but what the Greeks meant in practice was very different from what we mean. During the epoch of the tragedians **Aeschylus** (c. 525–c. 456 BCE), **Sophocles** (c. 496–c. 406 BCE), and **Euripides** (c. 485–c. 405 BCE) the enactment of tragic dramas was more a ritual infused with competitions for prizes for the best actor and the best play than it was theatre in our sense. The occasions for the playing of the tragedies were religious festivals. Highly sought-after prizes were awarded. These prizes were based on aesthetic excellence, but the events in which that excellence was demonstrated were not artistic but ritual. It was Aristotle, writing a century after the high point of Greek tragedy as embodied performance, who codified the aesthetic understanding of theatre in its entirety – in all of its “six parts,” as the philosopher parsed it. After Aristotle, in Hellenic and Roman times, the entertainment-aesthetic aspect of theatre became more dominant as the ritual efficacious elements receded.

**Aeschylus** (c. 525–c. 456 BCE): Greek playwright and actor, regarded as the first great tragedian. Surviving works include *The Persians* (c. 472 BCE) and *The Oresteia* (458 BCE).

**Sophocles** (c. 496–c. 406 BCE): Greek playwright, credited with introducing the third actor onto the stage of tragedy. Surviving plays include *Oedipus Tyrannus* (c. 429 BCE), *Electra* (date uncertain), and *Antigone* (c. 441 BCE).

**Euripides** (c. 485–c. 405 BCE): Greek playwright whose surviving works include *Medea* (431 BCE), *Hippolytus* (428 BCE), *The Trojan Women* (415 BCE), and *The Bacchae* (c. 405 BCE).

Let us skip ahead a millennium or more. During much of the medieval period in Europe, acting written dramas on public stages was “forgotten” or at least not practiced. But this did not mean there was a scarcity of performances. On the streets, in town squares, in castles and mansions a wide range of popular entertainments held people’s attention. There were a multitude of mimes, magicians, animal acts, acrobats, puppet shows, and what would later become the commedia dell’arte.

Also from early medieval times, the Church offered a rich panoply of feasts, services, and rituals. By the fourteenth century these had joined to form the basis for the great cycle plays celebrating and enacting the history of the world from Creation through the Crucifixion and Resurrection to the Last Judgment. These we would now call “theatre,” but they were not called that at the time. The anti-theatrical prejudice of the Church disallowed any such designation. But then, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the revolution in thought and practice called the Renaissance began. Renaissance means “rebirth,” and what the humanists of the Renaissance thought they were bringing back to life was the classical culture of Greece and Rome. When works were staged in Vicenza’s Teatro Olympico (Theatre of Olympus), the makers felt they were reinventing Greek . . . theatre (not ritual). Whether an event is theatre or not, performance or not, depends on the dominant thinking of the day.

Make another leap in time to the last third of the nineteenth century. The notion of theatre as an art was by then well established. In fact, so well founded that counter-movements called “avant-garde” erupted frequently as efforts among radical artists to disrupt the status quo. Each new wave attempted to dislodge what went before. Some of yesterday’s avant-garde became today’s establishment. The list of avant-garde movements is long, including realism, naturalism, symbolism, futurism, surrealism, constructivism, dada, expressionism, cubism, theatre of the absurd, Happenings, Fluxus, environmental theatre, performance art . . . and more. Sometimes works in these styles were considered theatre, sometimes dance, sometimes music, sometimes visual art, sometimes multimedia, etc. Often enough, events were attacked or dismissed as not being art at all – as were Happenings, an antecedent to performance art. Allan Kaprow, creator of the first Happening, jumped at this chance to make a place for what he called “lifelike art” (see **Kaprow box**). The term “performance art” was coined in the 1970s as an umbrella for works that otherwise resisted categorization.

The outcome is that today many events that formerly would not be thought of as art or performance are now so designated. These kinds of actions are performed everywhere, not just in the West. The feedback loop is very complicated. The work of a Japanese butoh dancer may effect a German choreographer whose dances in turn are elaborated on by a Mexican performance artist . . . and so on without definite national or cultural limits. Beyond composed art works is a blurry world of “accidental” or “incidental” performance. Webcams broadcast what people

# Allan Kaprow

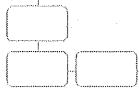
## *Artlike Art and Lifelike Art*

Western art actually has two avantgarde histories: one of artlike art, and the other of lifelike art. [...] Simplistically put, artlike art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, while lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else. In other words, there's art at the service of art, and art at the service of life. The maker of artlike art tends to be a specialist; the maker of lifelike art, a generalist. [...]

Avantgarde artlike art occupies the majority of attention from artists and public. It is usually seen as serious and a part of the mainstream Western art-historical tradition, in which mind is separate from body, individual is separate from people, civilization is separate from nature, and each art is separate from the other. [...] Avantgarde artlike art basically believes in (or does not eliminate) the continuity of the traditionally separate genres of visual art, music, dance, literature, theatre, etc. [...]

Avantgarde lifelike art, in contrast, concerns an intermittent minority (Futurists, Dadas, guatai, Happeners, fluxartists, Earthworkers, body artists, provos, postal artists, noise musicians, performance poets, shamanistic artists, conceptualists). Avantgarde lifelike art is not nearly as serious as avantgarde artlike art. Often it is quite humorous. It isn't very interested in the great Western tradition either, since it tends to mix things up: body with mind, individual with people in general, civilization with nature, and so on. Thus it mixes up the traditional art genres, or avoids them entirely – for example, a mechanical fiddle playing around the clock to a cow in the barnyard. Or going to the laundromat. Despite formalist and idealist interpretations of art, lifelike art makers' principal dialogue is not with art but with everything else, one event suggesting another. If you don't know much about life, you'll miss much of the meaning of the lifelike art that's born of it. Indeed, it's never certain if an artist who creates avantgarde lifelike art is an artist.

1983, "The Real Experiment," 36, 38



do at home over the internet. Television frames the news as entertainment. Performance theorists argue that everyday life is performance – courses are offered in the aesthetics of everyday life. At present, there is hardly any human activity that is not a performance for someone somewhere. Generally, the tendency over the past century has been to dissolve the boundaries separating performing from not-performing, art from not-art. At one end of the spectrum it's clear what a performance is, what an art work is; at the other end of the spectrum no such clarity exists.

## "As" Performance

In her studies of cooking as performance, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes a theory very close to my own. She says that to perform is to do, to behave, and to show (see **Kirshenblatt-Gimblett box**). I want to go further. Any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied "as" performance, can be analyzed in terms of doing, behaving, and showing. Take maps, for example.

Everyone knows the world is round, but flat maps are extremely useful. You can't see the whole world or even a significant part of it at the same time on a globe. Globes can't be folded and easily carried. Maps flatten the world the better to lay out territories on a table, tack them to a wall, or tuck them in a briefcase. Maps depict anything from nations to topography to demography. On common world maps, nations are separated from each other by colors and lines, and cities appear as circles, rivers as lines, and oceans as large, usually blue, areas. Everything is named – achieving status is being "on the map." But the "real earth" does not look like its mapped representations – or even like a globe. People were astonished when they first saw photographs taken from space of the white-flecked blue ball earth (see figure 2.7). There was no sign of a human presence at all.

Nation-states seem so natural that when most people picture the world as a map they see it divided into nation-states. But maps are not neutral. They perform a particular interpretation of how the world ought to be. A map is a "projection," a particular way of representing a sphere on a flat surface. On maps, nations do not overlap or share territories.

## Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

### *Food as Performance*

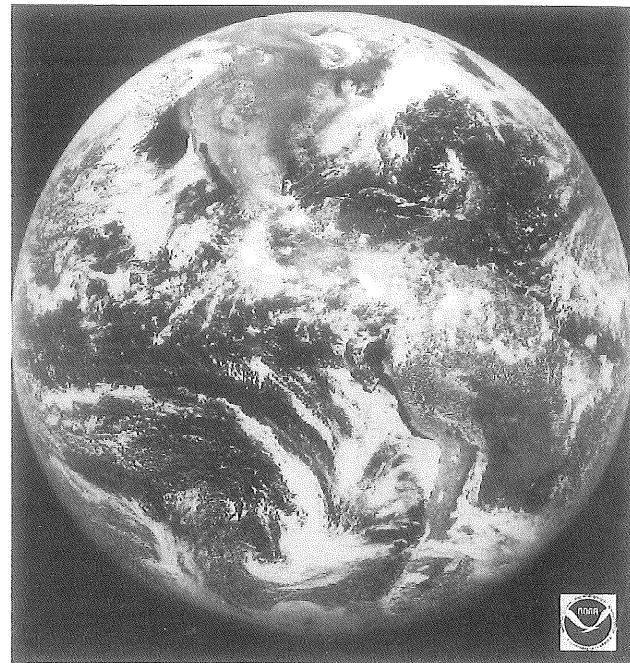
Food and performance converge conceptually at three junctures. First, *to perform is to do*, to execute, to carry out to completion, to discharge a duty – in other words, all that governs the production, presentation, and disposal of food. To perform in this sense is to make food, to serve food. It is about materials, tools, techniques, procedures, actions. It is about getting something done. It is in this sense, first and foremost, that we can speak of the performing kitchen.

Second, *to perform is to behave*. This is what Erving Goffman calls the performance in everyday life. Whether a matter of habit, custom, or law, the divine etiquette of ritual, codifications of social grace, the laws governing cabarets and liquor licenses, or the health and sanitation codes, performance encompasses the social practices that are part and parcel of what Pierre Bourdieu [(1930– )] calls *habitus*. To perform in this sense is to behave appropriately in relation to food at any point in its production, consumption, or disposal, each of which may be subject to precise protocols or taboos. Jewish and Hindu laws of ritual purity and formal etiquette stipulate the requirements in exquisite detail. They involve the performance of precepts as well as precepts of performance.

Third, *to perform is to show*. When doing and behaving are displayed, when they are shown, when participants are invited to exercise discernment, evaluation, and appreciation, food events move towards the theatrical and, more specifically, towards the spectacular. It is here that taste as a sensory experience and taste as an aesthetic faculty converge. The conflation of the two meanings of taste can be found in Enlightenment aesthetics and in the Hindu concept of *rasa* alike.

1999, "Playing to the Senses:  
Food as a Performance Medium," 1–2

Boundaries are definite. For more than one nation to enforce its claim to the same space means war, as between Pakistan and India over Kashmir or Palestine and Israel over Jerusalem. The most common projection in use today is derived from the Mercator projection, developed in the sixteenth century by the Flemish geographer-cartographer **Gerardus Mercator** (1512–94) (see figure 2.8).



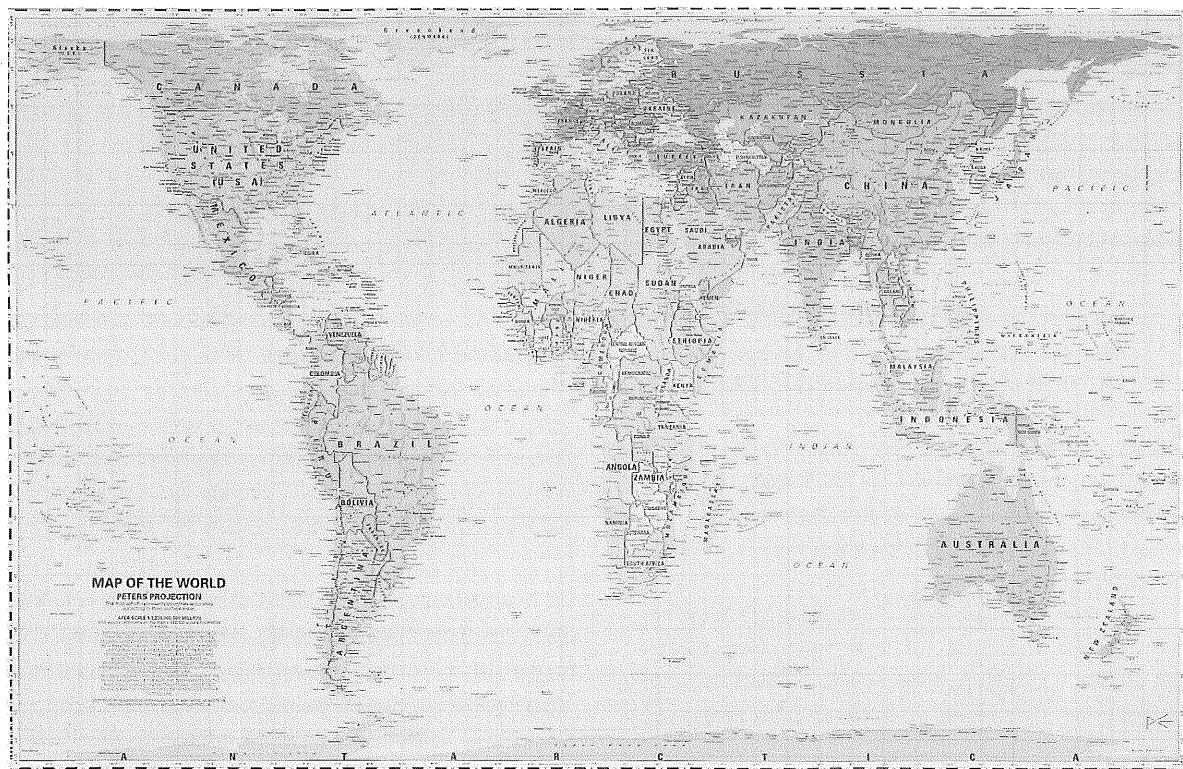
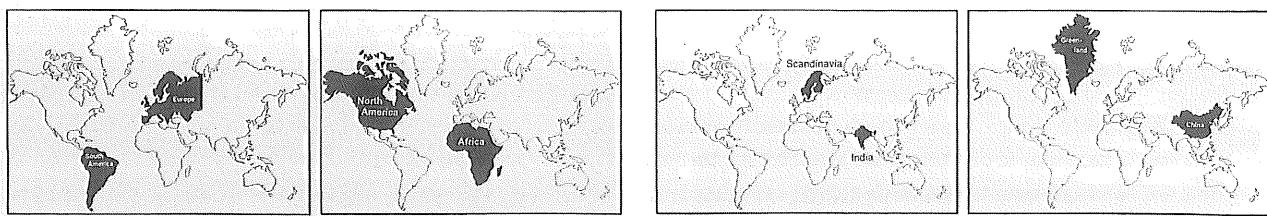
**fig 2.7.** The western hemisphere of planet earth as photographed by a geostationary satellite in 1995. Copyright Popperfoto.

**Gerardus Mercator (1512–94):** Flemish geographer-cartographer whose basic approach to map-making is still practiced today. His actual name was Gerhard Kremer, but like many European scholars of his day, he used a latinized version of his name.

The Mercator projection distorts the globe wildly in favor of the northern hemisphere. The further north, the relatively bigger the territory appears. Spain is as large as Zimbabwe, North America dwarfs South America, and Europe is one-fourth the size of Africa. In other words, Mercator's map enacts the world as the colonial powers wished to view it. Although times have changed since the sixteenth century, the preponderance of world economic and military power remains in the hands of Europe and its North American inheritor, the USA. Perhaps it won't be this way in another century or two. If so, a different projection will be in common use. Indeed, with satellite photography a detailed remapping of the globe is taking place. There are also maps showing the world "upside down," that is, with south on top; or drawn according to population, showing China and India four times the size of the USA. The Peters Projection developed in 1974 by **Arno Peters** (1916– ) is an "area accurate" map showing the world's areas sized correctly in relation to each other (see figure 2.9). No longer is Greenland the same size as Africa when in fact Africa is fourteen times larger than Greenland. But the Peters map has its own inaccuracies. It is

## PERFORMANCE STUDIES

**fig 2.8.** A contemporary version of the Mercator Projection map of the world. Copyright Worldview Publications.



**fig 2.9.** The Peters Projection “area accurate” world map. Copyright Oxford Cartographers.

not correct in terms of shape – the southern hemisphere is elongated, the northern squashed. Making a flat map of a round earth means that one must sacrifice either accurate shape or size. If the Peters map looks “unnatural,” then you know how much the Mercator projection – or any other map – is a performance.

**Arno Peters (1916– ):** German historian. Developed in 1974 an area-accurate world map, known as the Peters Projection.

One of the meanings of “to perform” is to get things done according to a particular plan or scenario. Mercator’s

maps proved very helpful for navigating the seas because straight lines on the projection kept to compass bearings. Mercator drew his maps to suit the scenarios of the mariners, merchants, and military of an expansionist, colonizing Western Europe. Similarly, the authors of the new maps have scenarios of their own which their maps enact. Interpreting maps this way is to examine map-making “as” performance. Every map not only represents the earth in a specific way, but also enacts power relationships.

It’s not just maps. Everything and anything can be studied “as” any discipline of study – physics, economics, law, etc. What the “as” says is that the object of study will be regarded

"from the perspective of," "in terms of," "interrogated by" a particular discipline of study. For example, I am composing this book on a Dell Dimension 4001 desktop computer. If I regard it "as physics," I would examine its size, weight, and other physical qualities, perhaps even its atomic and subatomic qualities. If I regard it "as mathematics," I would delve into the binary codes of its programs. Regarding it "as law" would mean interpreting networks of patents, copyrights, and contracts. If I were to treat the computer "as performance" I would evaluate the speed of its processor, the clarity of its display, the usefulness of the pre-packaged software, its size and portability, and so on. I can envision Bill Parcells staring out at me telling me how well my computer performs.

## Make Believe Versus Make Belief

What about the many performances in everyday life? Playing professional roles, gender and race roles, and shaping one's identity are not make-believe actions (as playing a role on stage or in a film most probably is). The performances of everyday life (which I will discuss in more detail in chapters 5 and 6) "make belief" – create the very social realities they enact. In "make-believe" performances, the distinction between what's real and what's pretended is kept clear. Children playing "doctor" or "dress-up" know that they are pretending. On stage, various conventions – the stage itself as a distinct domain, the opening and closing a curtain or dimming the lights, the curtain call, etc. – mark the distinction between pretending and being. When people go to the movies or the theatre they know that the social and personal worlds enacted are not those of the actors but those of the characters. Of course, it is this distinction that first the avant-garde and later the media and the internet have successfully sabotaged.

**Make-believe** performances maintain a clearly marked boundary between the world of the performance and everyday reality. **Make-belief** performances intentionally blur that boundary.

Public figures are often making belief – enacting the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept "for real." When an American President signs an important piece of legislation, or makes a grave announcement of national importance, his handlers stage the event in

the Oval Office of the White House where the President can perform his authority. Behind him is an array of VIPs, including the Vice-President. A large Presidential Seal provides an appropriately patriotic foreground (see figure 2.10). At other times, the national leader may wish to appear as a friend or a good neighbor talking informally with "fellow citizens" (see figure 2.11).

By now, everyone knows these kinds of activities are staged in every detail. Today's American Presidency – at least its public face – is a totally scripted performance. The President's words are written by professional speech-writers, the backdrops and settings carefully designed for maximum effect, the Chief Executive himself well rehearsed. Teleprompters insure that the President will appear to be speaking off the cuff while he is actually reading every word. Each detail is choreographed, from how the President makes eye contact (with the camera, with the selected audience at a town meeting), to how he uses his hands, dresses, and is made-up. The goal of all this is to "make belief" – first, to build the public's confidence in the President, and second, to sustain the President's belief in himself. His performances convince himself even as he strives to convince others.

Arguably, the President is an important personage by virtue of his position of authority. But with the exponential growth of media, hordes of citizens have jumped into the make-belief business. Some are hucksters selling everything from cooking utensils and firm buttocks to everlasting salvation in the blood of Jesus. Others are venerable network "anchors," familiar voices and faces holding the public in place amidst the swift currents of the news. Still others are "experts" – economists, lawyers, retired generals, etc. – whose authority is sometimes created simply by their frequent appearances. Then come the "spin masters," employed by politicians and corporations to turn bad news into good. As for the producers behind the scenes, their job is to make certain that whatever is going on is dramatized enough to attract viewers. The greater the number watching, the higher the revenues from sponsors. Some news is inherently exciting – disasters, wars, crimes, and trials. But media masters have learned how to dramatize the stock market and the weather. How to build the "human interest" angle into every story. The producers know that the same information is available from many different venues, so their job is to develop attractive sideshows. Paradoxically, the result is a public less easy to fool. With so many kinds of performances on view, people are sophisticated and suspicious deconstructors of the theatrical techniques deployed to lure them.



**fig 2.10.** In a formally arranged "photo op," President Bill Clinton, flanked by Vice President Al Gore and other VIPs, makes a pitch for a piece of legislation – using the Oval Office as his stage set, 1997. Photograph by Win McNamee. Copyright Popperfoto.



**fig 2.11.** British Prime Minister Tony Blair acts the part of a "man of the people" in an "informal meeting" with some "ordinary citizens." Of course, such meetings are carefully planned, staged, and photographed. Copyright *The Independent Picture Syndication*.

## Blurry Boundaries

Let's return to Mercator's map. The world represented there is one of neatly demarcated sovereign nation-states. That world no longer exists, if it ever did (in Mercator's day the European nations were constantly at war with each other over who controlled what). Today national boundaries are extremely porous, not only to people but even more so to information and ideas. The newest maps can't be drawn because what needs to be represented is not territories but networks of relationships. Mapping these takes fractals or streams of numbers continually changing their shapes and values. The notion of fixity has been under attack at least since 1927, when **Werner Heisenberg** (1901–76) proposed his "uncertainty principle." Few people outside of a select group of quantum physicists could really understand Heisenberg's theory. But "uncertainty" or "indeterminacy" rang a bell. It was a very appropriate and powerful metaphor for the epoch. It affected thought in many disciplines. It was a call to the making of a certain kind of art. **John Cage** (1912–92) used indeterminacy as the basis for his music, influencing a whole generation of artists and theorists in many fields.

**Werner Heisenberg (1901–76):** German physicist, winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1932, is best known for his uncertainty principle.

**John Cage (1912–92):** American composer and music theorist whose interests spanned using indeterminacy to make art, Zen Buddhism, and mushrooms. Author of *Silence: Selected Lectures and Writings* (1961) and *A Year from Monday* (1967). His many musical compositions include *Fontana Mix* (1960) and *Roaratorio* (1982).

Boundaries are blurry in different ways. On the internet people participate effortlessly in a system that transgresses national boundaries. Even languages present less of a barrier than before. Already you can login, write in your own language, and know that your message will be translated into the language of whomever you are addressing. At present, this facility is available in only a limited number of languages. But the repertory of translatables will increase. It will be routine for Chinese speakers to address Kikuyu speakers or for someone in a remote village to address a message to any number of people globally. Furthermore, for better or worse, English has become a global rather than national language. At the United Nations, 120 countries representing more than 97 percent of the world's populations choose English as their medium for international communication.

**Heisenberg uncertainty principle:** A principle of quantum mechanics which states that accurate measurement of one of two related observable quantities (for example, position) produces uncertainty in the measurement of the other (for example, velocity), so that while each quantity may be measured accurately on its own, both together cannot be measured beyond a certain degree of accuracy. First formulated by German physicist **Werner Heisenberg** (1901–76).

The dissolution of national boundaries is occurring in relation to manufactured objects as well as with regard to politics and information. If, for example, you drive an American or Japanese or Swedish or German or Korean car, you may believe it came from the country whose label it displays. But where were the parts manufactured? Where was the car assembled, where designed? The brand name refers to itself, not to a place of origin. Japanese cars are made in Tennessee and Fords roll off assembly lines in Canada, Europe, and elsewhere. Mexico is a major assembly point for many cars. And what about your clothes? Look at the labels of the clothes you are wearing right now. Do your dress, pants, shoes, and blouse come from the same country? Do you even know where they were stitched or by whom and at what wage or under what kind of working conditions?

But more than cars and clothes are transnational. Cultures are also blurring. "Globalization" is accelerating. Airports are the same wherever you travel; standardized fast food is available in just about every major city in the world. American television and movies are broadcast everywhere. But the USA itself is increasingly intercultural in both its populations and its living styles. The profusion of international arts festivals and the hosts of artists touring all parts of the world are a major means of circulating styles of performing. "World beat" music combines elements of African, Asian, Latin American, and Euro-American sounds. New hybrids are emerging all the time. People are arguing whether or not all this mixing is good or bad. Is globalization the equivalent of Americanization? Questions of globalization and intercultural performance will be taken up in chapter 8.

## The Functions of Performance

I have touched on what performance is and what can be studied as performance. But what do performances accomplish? It is difficult to stipulate the functions of performance. Over time, and in different cultures, there have been a number of proposals. One of the most inclusive is

that of the Indian sage **Bharata Muni** (c. second century BCE—c. second century CE), who felt that performance was a comprehensive repository of knowledge and a very powerful vehicle for the expression of emotions (see **Bharata box**). The Roman poet-scholar **Horace** (65–8 BCE) in his *Ars Poetica* argued that theatre ought to entertain and educate, an idea taken up by many Renaissance thinkers and later by the German playwright and director **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956).

## Bharata Muni

### *The Functions of Natya* (Dance-Music-Theatre)

I [The god Brahma] have created the Natyaveda to show good and bad actions and feelings of both the gods and yourselves. It is a representation of the entire three worlds and not only of the gods or of yourselves. Now dharma [duty], now artha [strategies], now kama [love], now humor, now fights, now greed, now killing. Natya teaches right to people going wrong; it gives enjoyment for those who are pleasure seekers; it chastises those who are ill-behaved and promotes tolerance in the well-behaved. It gives courage to cowards, energy to the brave. It enlightens people of little intellect and gives wisdom to the wise. Natya provides entertainment to kings, fortitude to those grief stricken, money to those who want to make a living, and stability to disturbed minds. Natya is a representation of the ways of the world involving various emotions and differing circumstances. It relates the actions of good, bad, and middling people, giving peace, entertainment, and happiness, as well as beneficial advice, to all. It brings rest and peace to persons afflicted by sorrow, fatigue, grief, or helplessness. There is no art, no knowledge, no learning, no action that is not found in natya.

1996 [second century BCE–second century CE],  
*The Natysastra*, chapter 1



**Bharata Muni (c. second century BCE–second century CE):** Indian sage credited with authorship of *The Natysastra*, the primary theoretical treatise of classical Indian theatre and dance.

**Horace (65–8 BCE):** Roman poet whose *Ars Poetica* (*The Art of Poetry*) offers advice on the construction of drama. His basic instruction that art should both “entertain and educate” is very close to Brecht’s ideas on the function of theatre.

**Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956):** German playwright, director, and performance theorist. In 1949 he and actress Helene Weigel (1900–71), his wife, founded the Berliner Ensemble. Major works include *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1941), *Galileo* (1943), *The Good Woman of Szechuan* (1943), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948 Eng; 1954 Ger.) The dates refer to stage premieres. Many of his theoretical writings are anthologized in English, in *Brecht on Theatre* (1964).

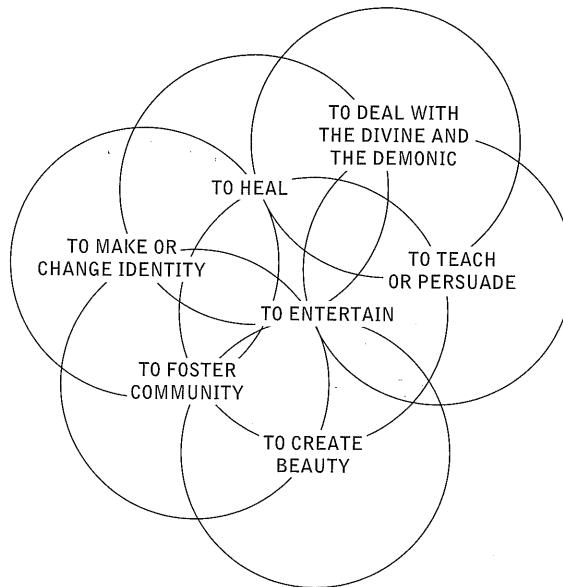
❖ Putting together ideas drawn from various sources, I find seven functions of performance:

- To entertain
- To make something that is beautiful
- To mark or change identity
- To make or foster community
- To heal
- To teach, persuade, or convince
- To deal with the sacred and/or the demonic.

These are not listed in order of importance. For some people one or a few of these will be more important than others. But the hierarchy changes according to who you are and what you want to get done. No performance accomplishes all of these functions, but many performances emphasize more than one.

Very rarely does a performance focus on one or even two functions. A street demonstration or propaganda play may be mostly about teaching, persuading, and convincing – but such a show also has to entertain and may foster community. Shamans heal, but they entertain also, foster community, and deal with the sacred and/or demonic. A doctor’s “bedside manner” is a performance of encouragement, teaching, and healing. A charismatic Christian church service heals, entertains, maintains community solidarity, invokes both the sacred and the demonic, and, if the sermon is tolerable, teaches. If someone at the service declares for Jesus and is reborn, that person’s identity is marked and changed. The President addressing the nation wants to convince and foster community – but he had better entertain also if he wants people to listen. Rituals tend to have the greatest number of functions, commercial productions the fewest. A Broadway

musical will entertain, but little else. The seven functions are best represented as overlapping and interacting spheres, as a network (see figure 2.12).



**fig 2.12.** The seven interlocking spheres of performance. Drawing by Richard Schechner.

Whole works, even genres, can be shaped to very specific functions. Examples of political or propaganda performances are found all over the world. El Teatro Campesino of California, formed in the 1960s in order to support Mexican migrant farm workers in the midst of a bitter strike, built solidarity among the strikers, educated them to the issues involved, attacked the bosses, and entertained. Groups such as Greenpeace and ACTUP use performance militantly in support of a healthy ecology and to gain money for AIDS research and treatment. “Theatre for development” as practiced widely since the 1960s in Africa, Latin America, and Asia educates people in a wide range of subjects and activities, from birth control and cholera prevention to irrigation and the protection of endangered species. **Augusto Boal’s (1931– )** Theatre of the Oppressed empowers “spectators” to enact, analyze, and change their situations.

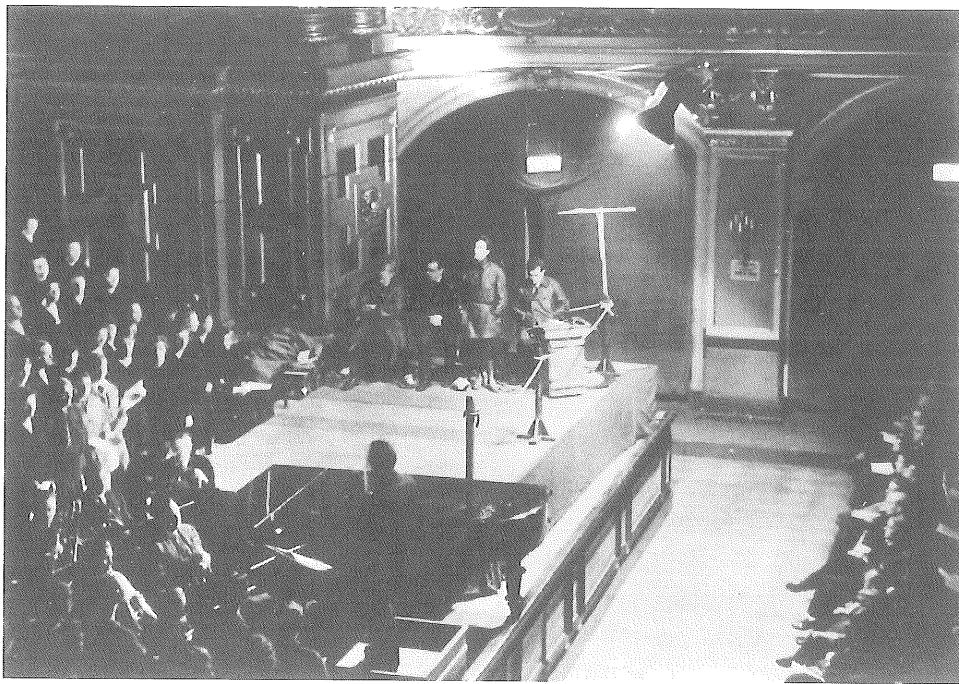
**Augusto Boal (1931– ):** Brazilian director and theorist, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. His books include *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985), *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1980, Eng. 1992), *Legislative Theatre* (1998), and his autobiography, *Hamlet and the Baker’s Son* (2001).

Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is based to some degree on Brecht’s work, especially his *Lehrstücke* or “learning plays” of the 1930s such as *The Measures Taken* or *The Exception and the Rule* (see figure 2.13). During China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–75), which she helped orchestrate, **Jiang Qing** (1914–91) produced a series of “model operas” carefully shaped to teach, entertain, and put forward a new kind of community based on the values of Chinese Communism as Jiang interpreted them. These theatre and ballet pieces employed both traditional Chinese performance styles modified to suit the ideological purposes of the Cultural Revolution and elements of Western music and staging (see figure 2.14). The utopian vision of the model operas contradicted the terrible fact of the millions who were killed, tortured, and displaced by the Cultural Revolution. But by the turn of the twenty-first century, the model operas were again being performed, studied, and enjoyed for their entertainment value, technical excellence, and artistic innovations (see **Melvin and Cai** box).

**Jiang Qing (1914–91):** Chinese Communist leader, wife of Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976). As Deputy Director of China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Jiang Qing sought to redefine all forms of artistic expression in strict adherence to revolutionary ideals. She oversaw the development of “model operas” and “model ballets,” versions of Chinese traditional performance genres that made heroes of peasants and workers instead of aristocrats. After the Cultural Revolution, she was tried as one of the Gang of Four. She died in prison.

Entertainment means something produced in order to please a public. But what may please one audience may not please another. So one cannot specify exactly what constitutes entertainment – except to say that almost all performances strive, to some degree or other, to entertain. I include in this regard both fine and popular arts, as well as rituals and the performances of everyday life. What about performances of avant-garde artists and political activists designed to offend? Guerrilla theatre events disrupt and may even destroy. These are not entertaining. However, “offensive” art usually is aimed at two publics simultaneously: those who do not find the work pleasant, and those who are entertained by the discomfort the work evokes in others.

Beauty is hard to define. Beauty is not equivalent to being “pretty.” The ghastly, terrifying events of kabuki, Greek tragedy, Elizabethan theatre, and some performance art are not pretty. Nor are the demons invoked by shamans. But the skilled enactment of horrors can be beautiful and yield aesthetic pleasure. Is this true of such absolute horrors as



**fig 2.13.** *The Measures Taken*, by Bertolt Brecht and Hans Eisler, a *Lehrstück* or “teaching play” – a play with a clear message. At the Berlin Philharmonie, 1930. Copyright Bertolt Brecht Archive, Berlin.



**fig 2.14.** *The Red Lantern*, one of five “model operas” performed in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Copyright David King Collection.

## Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai

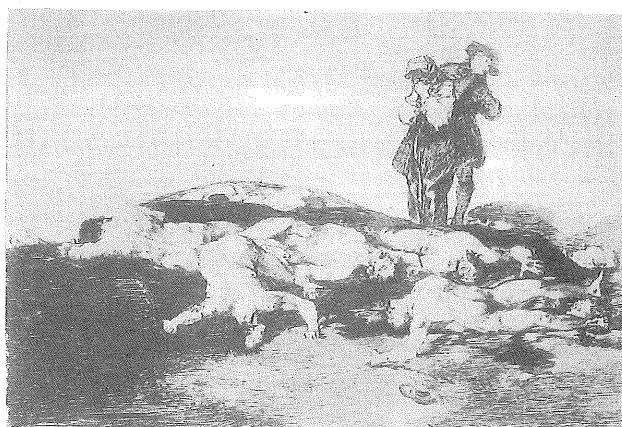
### *The Model Operas*

“The Communist Party of China is like the bright sun,” sang Granny Sha, her face glowing through wrinkles of sorrow as she told of abuse at the hands of a “poisonous snake, bloodsucker” landlord in Kuomintang-ruled China. Her words, soaring and elongated in the lyrical gymnastics of Beijing Opera, were punctuated by a roar of applause from the audience in the Yifu theatre here. [...] While the scene on stage closely resembled Cultural Revolution-era performance, the audience members – mostly middle-aged and stylishly dressed, casually taking cell phone calls, slurping Cokes and licking ice cream bars as the opera proceeded – were decidedly Shanghai 2000. [...] As the number of performances increases, so do attempts to analyze the artistic value of this genre created expressly to serve politics. “Naturally, this is sensitive,” said Wang Renyuan, a Nanjing-based

professor who wrote a book on the music in model operas. "We oppose the Cultural Revolution now, so of course products from then are also criticized. But model operas were very special, and we can't just ignore them. If we say that the Cultural Revolution was politics raping art, then we shouldn't still be doing this today. Criticize the Cultural Revolution, criticize Jiang Qing, but why can't we analyze model operas artistically?" [...] Most intellectuals, even those who detest the genre, are willing to concede that if people want to watch model operas, they should have that right. "I don't want to watch them," said Mr. Luo Zhengrong, the composer. "I don't want to hear them. But they were created well, and if they didn't have a political purpose, they wouldn't exist. The fact is, there's a market for them. If there wasn't a market, they wouldn't be performed."

2000, "Why This Nostalgia for Fruits of Chaos?" 1, 31

slavery, the Shoah, or the extermination of Native Americans? **Francisco de Goya y Luciente's** (1746–1828) *The Disasters of War* show that nothing is beyond the purview of artistic treatment (see figure 2.15). Philosopher **Susanne K. Langer** (1895–1985) argued that in life people may endure terrible experiences, but in art these experiences are transformed into "expressive form" (see Langer box). One of the differences between "art" and "life" is that in art, we do not experience the event itself but its representation. Langer's classical notions of aesthetics are challenged in this epoch of simulation, digitization, performance artists, and webcam



**fig 2.15.** From Goya's *Disasters of War*, 1810–14. From [www.napoleonguide.com/goya18.html](http://www.napoleonguide.com/goya18.html).

performers who "do" the thing itself in front of our very eyes. A considerable amount of postmodern art does not offer viewers objects or actions for contemplation.

**Francisco de Goya y Luciente (1746–1828):** Spanish artist. Often referred to simply as "Goya." His series of etchings titled *The Disasters of War* chronicled the Peninsular Wars (1808–14) among Spain, Portugal, and France.

**Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985):** American philosopher and aesthetician. Her major works include *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), *Feeling and Form* (1953), and *Problems of Art* (1957).

## Susanne K. Langer

### *Every Good Art Work is Beautiful*

A work of art is intrinsically expressive; it is designed to abstract and preset forms for perception – forms of life and feeling, activity, suffering, selfhood – whereby we conceive these realities, which otherwise we can but blindly undergo. Every good work of art is beautiful; as soon as we find it so, we have grasped its expressiveness, and until we do we have not seen it as good art, though we may have ample intellectual reason to believe that it is so. Beautiful works may contain elements that, taken in isolation, are hideous. [...] The emergent form, the whole, is alive and therefore beautiful, as awful things may be – as gargoyles, and fearful African masks, and the Greek tragedies of incest and murder are beautiful. Beauty is not identical with the normal, and certainly not with charm and sense appeal, though all such properties may go to the making of it. Beauty is expressive form.

1953, *Feeling and Form*, 395–96

## Conclusion

There are many ways to understand performance. Any event, action, or behavior may be examined "as" performance. Using the category "as" performance has advantages. One can consider things provisionally, in process, and as they change

over time. In every human activity there are usually many players with different and even opposing points of view, goals, and feelings. Using “as” performance as a tool, one can look into things otherwise closed off to inquiry. One asks performance questions of events: How is an event deployed in space and disclosed in time? What special clothes or objects are put to use? What roles are played and how are these different, if at all, from who the performers usually are? How are the events controlled, distributed, received, and evaluated?

“Is” performance refers to more definite, bounded events marked by context, convention, usage, and tradition. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, clear distinctions between “as” performance and “is” performance are vanishing. This is part of a general trend toward the dissolution of boundaries of all kinds. The internet, globalization, and the ever-increasing presence of media is affecting human behavior at all levels. More and more people experience their lives as a connected series of performances: dressing up for a party, interviewing for a job, experimenting with sexual orientations and gender roles, playing a life role such as mother or son, or a professional role such as doctor or teacher. The sense that “performance is everywhere” is heightened by the increasingly mediatized environment we live in where people communicate by fax, phone, and the internet; where an unlimited quantity of information and entertainment comes through the air.

One way of ordering this complex situation is to arrange the performance genres, performative behaviors, and performance activities into a continuum (see figure 2.16). These genres, behaviors, and activities do not each stand alone. As in the spectrum of visible light, they blend into one another; their boundaries are indistinct. They interact with each other. The continuum is drawn as a straight line to accommodate the printed page. If I could work in three dimensions, I would shape the relationships as more of an overlapping and interlacing spheroid network. For example, though they stand at opposite ends of the straight-

line continuum, playing and ritualizing are closely related to each other. In some ways, they underlie all the rest as a foundation.

With regard to figure 2.16: games, sports, pop entertainments, and performing arts include many genres each with its own conventions, rules, history, and traditions. An enormous range of activities comes under these banners. Even the same activity – cricket, for example – varies widely. Cricket at a test match is not the same as that played on a neighborhood oval. And cricket in the Trobriand Islands, where it was changed into a ritual encounter between towns, with the home team always winning, and where it features dancing as much as hitting and fielding, is something else again. On the other hand, certain generalizations can be made. Even though genres are distinct, and no one would confuse the Superbowl with *Les Sylphides*, both ballet and football are about movement, contact, lifting, carrying, falling, and rushing to and fro. In many cultures, theatre, dance, and music are so wholly integrated that it is not possible to place a given event into one or the other category. Kathakali in India, a Makishi performance in Zambia, and the Deer Dance of the Yaquis are but three examples among many that integrate music, dance, and theatre (see figure 2.17).

The middle terms on the right side – performances in everyday life and identity constructions – are relatively fluid when compared to the strict governance on the left side. But that is not to say that there are no rules. Even the most apparently casual social interaction is rule-guided and culture-specific. Politeness, manners, body language, and the like all operate according to known scenarios. The specifics of the rules differ from society to society, circumstance to circumstance. But there is no human social interaction that is not “lawful,” that is not rule-bound.

The remaining chapters of this book explore these matters in more detail. Chapter 3 deals with ritual and chapter 4 with play. Chapter 5 concerns performativity, the extension of the idea of performance into all areas of human life. Chapter 6 is about the different kinds of performing

a

**PLAY-GAMES-SPORTS-POP ENTERTAINMENTS-PERFORMING ARTS-DAILY LIFE-RITUAL**

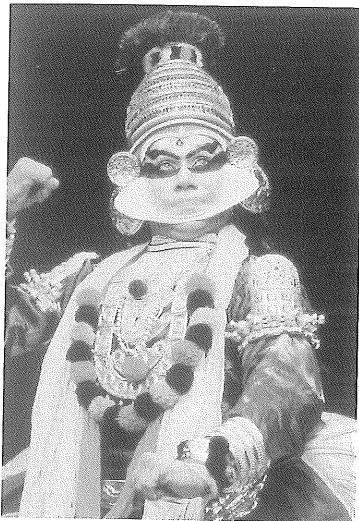
b

**GAMES-SPORTS-POP ENTERTAINMENTS-PERFORMING ARTS-DAILY LIFE**  
**PLAY AND RITUAL**

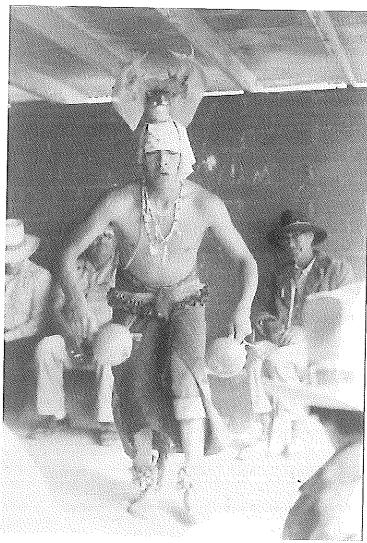
**fig 2.16.** The performance continuum showing the range, unity, and comprehensivity of performance. In 2.16a the continuum is depicted as a continuous range. In 2.16b “play” and “ritual” are shown as underlying, supporting, and permeating the range.

## WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?

**fig 2.17.** All of these performance genres integrate dance, theatre, and music.



A kathakali performer in Kerala, India, a heroic role displaying vigor and energy. Copyright Performing Arts Library.



Yaqui Deer Dancer, New Pascua, Arizona, 1980s. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

— from everyday life to theatre to trance. Chapter 7 is about performance processes — generating, presenting, and evaluating performances; and about how performers train, rehearse, warm-up, perform, and cool-down. Chapter 8 is an examination of globalization and its relationship to intercultural performances. It is neither possible nor advisable to fence these topics off from each other — so although each chapter develops a basic theme, there is also a good deal of overlap and interplay among the chapters.



Makishi mask performer, Zambia. Photograph courtesy of Richard Schechner.

### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Pick an action that would not usually be thought of as a performance. For example, a waiting on line at a supermarket checkout counter, a traffic light at a busy intersection, a person visiting a sick friend. Analyze these “as” performances.
2. Select an event from each of the following performance

genres – a sports match, a religious ritual, an everyday life occurrence, and a performing art. Discuss their similarities and differences with regard to venue, function, audience involvement, event-structure, and historical-cultural context.

### THINGS TO DO

1. Observe an everyday encounter of people you do not know. Intervene in the encounter yourself with a definite goal in mind. Afterwards, discuss how your intervention changed the performances of the others. Did they welcome or resent your invention? Why?
2. In small groups, take turns reproducing for your group a bit of behavior which you ordinarily do only in private. How did the behavior change when you were self-consciously performing for others?

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