Performance art

Performance art, a time-based art form that typically features a live presentation to an audience or to onlookers (as on a street) and draws on such arts as acting, poetry, music, dance, and painting. It is generally an event rather than an artifact, by nature ephemeral, though it is often recorded on video and by means of still photography.

Performance art arose in the early 1970s as a general term for a multitude of activities—including Happenings, body art, actions, events, and guerrilla theatre. It can embrace a wide diversity of styles. In the 1970s and ’80s, performance art ranged from Laurie Anderson’s elaborate media spectacles to Carolee Schneeman’s body ritual and from the camp glamour of the collective known as General Idea to Joseph Beuys’s illustrated lectures. In the 1990s it ranged from Ron Athey’s AIDS activism to Orlan’s use of cosmetic surgery on her own body. And in the early 21st century, Marina Abramović rekindled a great interest in the medium through her re-creation of historical pieces.

Performance art has its origins in the early 20th century, and it is closely identified with the progress of the avant-garde, beginning with Futurism. The Futurists’ attempt to revolutionize culture included performative evenings of poetry, music played on newly invented instruments, and a form of drastically distilled dramatic presentation. Such elements of Futurist events as simultaneity and noise-music were subsequently refined by artists of the Dada movement, which made great use of live art. Both Futurists and Dadaists worked to confound the barrier between actor and performer, and both capitalized on the publicity value of shock and outrage. An early theorist and practitioner in avant-garde theatre was the German artist Oskar Schlemmer, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1920 to 1929 and is perhaps best known for Das triadische Ballet (1916–22; “The Triadic Ballet”), which called for complex movements and elaborate costumes. Schlemmer presented his ideas in essays in a collective publication, Die Bühne im Bauhaus (1924; The Theater of the Bauhaus), edited by Walter Gropius.

Subsequent important developments in performance art occurred in the United States after World War II. In 1952, at Black Mountain College (1933–57) in North Carolina, the experimental composer John Cage organized an event that included performances by the choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, the poet Charles Olson, and the artist Robert Rauschenberg, among others. In its denial of traditional disciplinary boundaries, this influential event set a pattern for Happenings and Fluxus activities and provided an impetus for much of the live art of the following decade. In the 1960s and ’70s, performance art was characterized by improvisation, spontaneity, audience interaction, and political agitation. It also became a favourite strategy of feminist artists—such as the gorilla-masked Guerrilla Girls, whose mission was to expose sexism, racism, and corruption mainly in the art world—as well as of artists elsewhere in the world, such as the Chinese artist Zhang Huan. Popular manifestations of the genre can be seen in Blue Man Group and such events as the Burning Man festival, held annually in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada.