*If Performance can be thought of as live art by artists what happens to Performance when I is videoed?*

Reflecting on Jackson Pollock’s achievements two years after his death in 1956, Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) spoke of a ‘sort of ecstatic blindness’ underpinning the artist’s assurance in his own painting. For Kaprow, amongst others, the future of art was never as uncertain as it was in the latter half of the 1950s and early 60s in America. Through the liberation of painting Pollock also arguably destroyed it, denying any possible progression of this seemingly concrete form. Kaprow’s description conjures images of a vital plunge into that which was unknown in art; a conviction in the necessity of the radicalisation of convention. Despite this apparent optimism Kaprow reflects on the undeniable disappointment felt by himself and many of his contemporaries in relation to the absorption of the innovations of Abstract Expressionism into the academic cannon; the standardisation of the radical. What Kaprow termed the celebration of a ‘sanity in art’ movement in America can be better understood as the acceptance of this particular avant-garde to the point of its normalisation. This concern raised significant questions in terms of the direction of art post-painting in a time in which many felt unable to produce valid work under the limitations imposed by traditional means. The live-act or live-art form, better known as Performance Art, emerged out of this instability. In the late fifties in New York, Kaprow was beginning to stage events in which an amalgamation of disciplines united to form a sensory bombardment on both its participants and witnessing audience. The live art event eliminated the emphasis on the work as a singularity and shifted the attention to the transitory nature of the entire moment with a conscious regard for the specificity found within a particular space.

The performative aspect found in Pollock’s painting methods (or at least as projected by Hans Namuth’s documentation of the artist at work and Harold Rosenberg’s critical account) carried through to Kaprow’s so called *Happenings.* The crucial distinction to be made is that this performative aspect was not a means to create a work (a secondary art object) but rather *was* the work itself. If Mikel Dufrenne’s statement that all ‘creation is performance’ holds a certain validity then in this instance all performance is creation. With such a strong emphasis being held in performance art on the work’s transient existence, difficulties emerged concerning the elite selection of witnesses to these events. The negation of repeating performances naturally limited the work’s audience to those who were present at that precise event. This became a concern amongst many during the early 1970s and there starts to appear an emerging tendency for the mechanical documentation of performance through video. Photography had been continuously used to record the event since Kaprow and by Lisa Kahane in her involvement with the Fluxus movement, but with contemporary technology available people such as Babette Mangolte began recording this live art in continuous form through video. The controversy surrounding this action stems from the possible violation incurred on the performance through its technological mediation. When a performance is recorded does it retain its claim to performance or does the process of fixing the event through mechanical means alter its very nature?

The Italian artist Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) once stated that the primary concern within his art was not whether or not it was beautiful or ugly but that its success was to be found in its claim to truth. Truth has always been an area of debate amongst the mimetic arts but it is this denial of reproduction that makes Performance so compelling. As Marina Abramović (b. 1946) has stated, performance art is not reflective of something external to itself, in other words it is not theatre. In theatre the participants assume a role; they take on the part of another in order to express something outside of themselves internal to a fiction. Abramović holds onto the belief in the necessity of performance’s claim to truth in this respect. The performer does not play another but rather they present themself to the audience in their immediate state in a specific time and moment. Theatre is rehearsed and it is repeated, in this sense it can never escape the certainty of its reproduction as it is by nature a mimetic activity (for lack of a better word; imitative). As Peggy Phelan has suggested Performance is preoccupied with its validation in the present in that it cannot exist outside of its constituting moments. If Performance is by definition non-reproductive then when it is recorded through video (when it ‘enters the economy of reproduction’ to use Phelan’s term) then it becomes something other than performance. In one sense the performance becomes theatre in the context of a video. It can be repeated and witnessed in an altogether unnatural way which in turn allows for the introduction of deeper interpretative scrutiny, on a level that differs from that experienced in the first instance. The performance is lost in this respect as what remains is purely indexical. The so called document of the event can never assume the same validity or authority as the event itself (although photographs which isolate singular moments within a performance may come to be interpreted as symbolic of the whole and thus assume a more significant position than the work) and so what the record demonstrates is a trace of that which has past (like the smoke after a fire). To enter into the reproduced form is to obscure any experience of the performance in immediate, present time. As Jean-Paul Martinon has accurately commented ‘how are we to understand that which happens here and now, or which happened there and then?’ The deception of visual means of documentation lies in its ability to project an interpretation assumed as fact. The reception of such modes of mediation is based on the belief that what is being witnessed is what actually happened.

In an art form in which the audience assumes the role of active participant rather than passive receptor the conveyance of meaning in the work is not achieved through a fixed projection (as in a painting). In ‘The Creative Act’ Marcel Duchamp wrote that there are ‘two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.’ Abramović has commented that Performance Art cannot exist without the audience as they form an integral part of what it actually means for a performance piece to be as such. In this respect to consider Performance Art under an essentially Barthesian mode of interpretation the death of the author becomes the birth of the reader. The work is reliant on the physical presence of the audience for its meaning to be conveyed. Or in the instances when the two are so interdependent as to resist such an implication of preconceived meaning, the work becomes art only in the presence of an audience. If this is the case then its documentation through video creates different levels of audience; a hierarchical organisation of witnesses in relation to their proximity to the event. The immediate audience which witnesses the performance first-hand is arguably the highest point in the hierarchy in that its members contribute to the work itself. Their presence is a necessity for the event to be considered art and for it to be completed. The audience which witnesses the event through video is passively concerned. The experience through documentation denies any immediate involvement with the event being witnessed (a second-removed) and eliminates the possibility of public intervention. What is witnessed is not the event itself but a recording of it. In this respect all the immediacy is essentially compromised and the work can only ever exist in the past and not in the present.

A video of a Performance is more accurately understood under the implication that its role is essentially descriptive rather than documentary. Its projection of the event is limited by the restrictions imposed by the camera’s operator (physical positioning and proportional organisation), the framing quality of the lens and the quality of the technology being used. What is captured is not necessarily what was witnessed (connoting an idea similar to Rosalind Krauss’ conception of the optical unconscious but more specifically relating to the sequencing of frames) and what is understood originates from a process of interpretation rather than immediate experience. What is revealed on screen is both descriptive and reductive in that the visual projections that are recorded allow for an interpretation of the event without constituting the event itself. The performance is reduced to this form which can only ever exist as an aid to understanding rather than actual experience. The mind wishes to complete that which is implied on screen but which is not physically seen. In his discussion of the notion of the spectre in Marx, Jacques Derrida spoke of the ‘visibility of the invisible’ through which that which is not seen is revealed through that which is or that which is imagined and thus is projected back onto the visible. In relation to the videoing of Performance Art, things presented as fact (or rather things interpreted as fact) raise the question of their validity. An act of physical mutilation or harm as witnessed on screen brings about doubt in the spectator as to what is real and what is deception. The fact that many Performance Artists put themselves under extreme conditions of self-harm heightens the pertinence of such a concern. Chris Burden’s (b. 1946) piece entitled *Shoot* (1971) in which he directed an assistant to shoot him in the left arm with a rifle from the distance of five metres was both recorded on audio cassette and on video using a super eight camera. Whilst it would have been undeniable in its immediate experience that Burden was in fact shot in the arm, its translation onto film introduces an element of speculation. This in turn detracts from the potency of the experience initially conveyed in its performance and thus becomes a description of the event; in linguistic terms, a performative utterance rather than a performance. To answer the question as to whether what is witnessed is in fact Burden getting shot is to eliminate the Derridean spectre and satisfy disbelief. However, this does not convey the same immediacy and what is seen on screen is a compromised description of what actually took place. As Phelan has argued ‘the documentation then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.’ I would argue that the recording of Performance uses descriptive means to persuade the spectator to accept that which it sees as verifiable truth; the event itself, the performance.

In conclusion this essay has by no means been an attempt to analyse all the ways in which Performance Art was recorded through video and the subsequent implications of this activity. It must be understood that the term Performance is an all-encompassing one categorising a wide range of artists and types of work. To present a conclusive account of Performance Art as a whole would be to enter into a generalisation. It would, however, be pertinent in a consideration of Performance’s documentation through video to incorporate works that were specifically designed for their mediation through recording devices (although that could be a separate essay in itself). During the 1980s Performance artists began to actively consider the increased distribution of these works, in effect expanding out of the exclusive scope of the live events and into mass-production through video and television. Sally Banes (Dance Historian, b. 1947) wrote that ‘by the end of the 1980s, Performance Art had become so widely known that it no longer needed to be defined; mass culture, especially Television, had come to supply both structure and subject matter for much Performance Art, and several Performance artists (…) had indeed become crossover artists in mainstream entertainment.’ The work of Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian and Ann Magnuson are illustrative of this. In regard to the current discussion it appears that the eventual result of videoing Performance renders it yet another mass-produced commodity with all its immediate vitality being compromised. Its documentation becomes a form of supplementation for those who were not present at the event. That which is not received by this secondary audience *is* through video but what is received is considerably different from its form in the first instance. Phelan has called Performance Art an ‘un-documentable event’ in that it denies its reproducibility and the conventional forms of distribution though an emphasis on the act itself. In this respect its documentation becomes a constative act. The deception of video is in its presentation of an interpretation (both human and mechanical) which is then projected as the fact of the Performance rather than a singular description of it. If Performance’s ‘only life is in the present’ then it ceases to exist in video and what appears on the screen is a transmuted form of a past event.

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