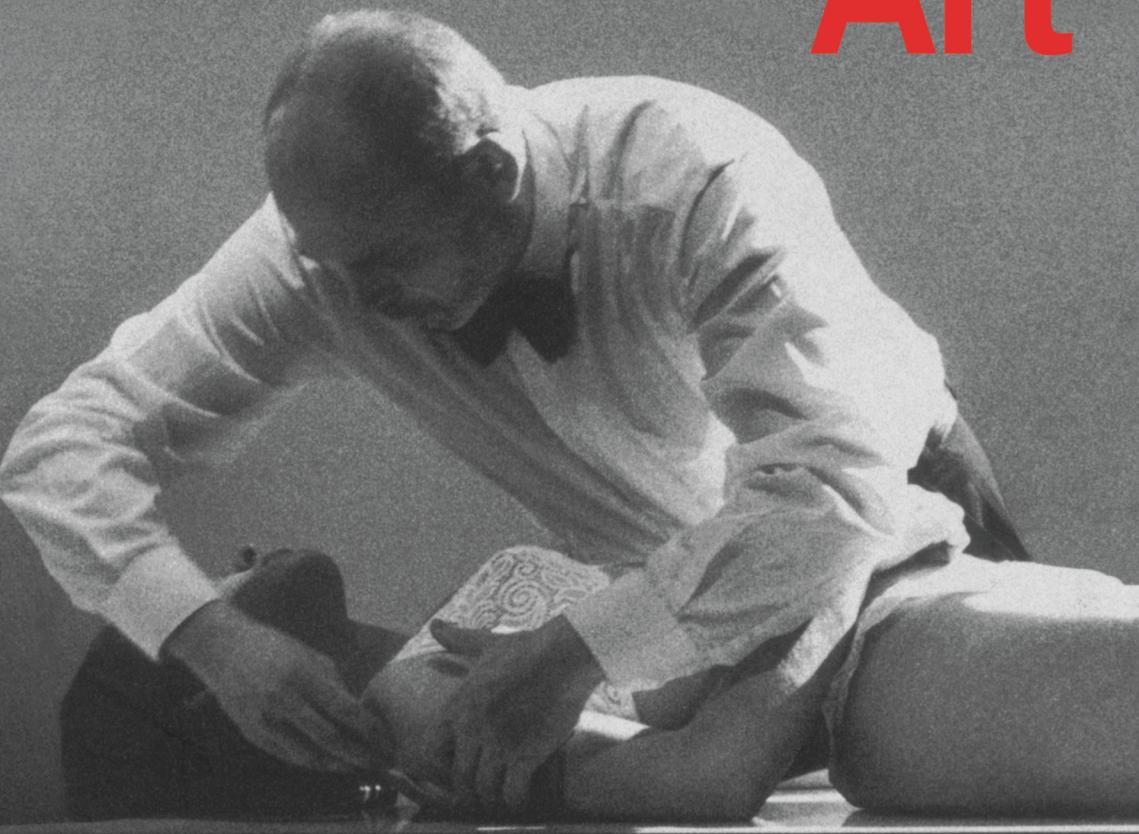


A Guide to its Theory and Practice **Anthony Howell**

The Analysis of Performance Art



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PERFORMANCE ART**

Contemporary Theatre Studies

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THE ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE ART

A guide to its theory and practice

Anthony Howell



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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

Franc Chamberlain

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PREFACE

I've noticed that there is a term common both to psychoanalysis and to my own theory of performance art. The term is *repetition*. I've identified this in performance art as a primary element (similar to a primary colour in painting in that it cannot be created by a mixture of any other elements). In analysis, repetition is associated with obsession. Jacques Lacan identifies it as one of the fundamental concepts of the field. In the celebrated instance of the "fort-da", Freud noticed that a child whose mother had to go away during the day played with an object attached to a thread. "Fort!" the child would exclaim, throwing the object away from his body: "Da!" he would say, pulling it back by the thread. The game was repeatedly played, suggesting to Freud that the child had sublimated his mother's absence by associating it with his own wilful throwing-away of an object whose return he could control. This observation paved the way for Freud's recognition of the notion of the *transference*.

So what is the notion of transference to performance art? Here, I'm reminded of a useful aesthetic principle which has a bearing on performance: use something you have already used *again*, but in a different way to the way you used it first. We might call this a *transference of use*. Here's an example. In my own "Homage to Raymond Roussel", a girl repeatedly removes her shoes in order to change her stockings. She also employs a hairbrush to brush her hair. Later in the piece, she spills rice on the floor and uses hairbrush and shoe as a sort of dustpan and brush to clear away the rice.

It now seems intriguing to examine certain performance terms in the light of analysis, and to examine certain analytic terms in the light of performance. For instance, what do terms such as "inconsistency" or "stillness" imply in psychoanalysis? What do terms such as "the drive" and "the unconscious" imply in performance?

First we need to get some of the principles of performance straight, since as yet there exists no grammar covering its discipline, a discipline which is nevertheless clearly distinct from that of theatre. Initially I set out to rectify this absence of a grammar, and my book is as much an attempt to identify the components of an action art as it is a psychical interpretation of that art. I took colour theory as my model. Aside from black and white, which are strictly tones rather than colours, painting has three indivisible primaries. Mixing these produces secondary colours. Similarly, performance has three primaries (though one may be considered a ground common to both the others), and these may be mixed to create secondary actions. The primary actions are *stillness*, *repetition* and *inconsistency*.

It is interesting to note that while repetition is a term much used in psychoanalysis, inconsistency is not used so often, or rather, it is not elevated into a concept, as is repetition. Gilles Deleuze uses the term "difference" (and has enlightening observations to make about this term in his book *Difference and Repetition*). But difference is not inconsistency: it is rather a commodity repetition must rely upon in order to be repetitive. More will be said about what distinguishes inconsistency from difference later, but for now I simply wish to establish that my specific project is to investigate the use of performative terms in a psychoanalytic context and vice versa. My guess is that some surprising insights will become apparent as we examine these disciplines in the light of each other.

As we do so, I shall cite examples, describing performances I have seen, and some which I haven't seen but have read about, and some which I know about only by hearsay. I see no need to apologise to historians over this. Few reviewers were willing to cover performance in its early days. And it is only recently that the live work of these artists has begun to be adequately recorded, and some of it eludes photographic or video-taped documentation. It is in the nature of this transient form that often its news has only been narrated aurally, relayed from one practitioner to another; and if the imagination sometimes supplies what memory lacks, so be it. It is thus that the art has assumed its mantle of legend.

Given its psycho/active interface, the book is designed to be a manual for the performance artist. It follows the stages of a course I have been teaching for several years, and those who would practise this art are advised not to plough through it but to treat each of its chapters methodically, gaining confidence and control in each aspect of the subject before moving on by working through the exercises to be found at the conclusion of each chapter. At a later stage these exercises can be referred to via the index should the performer wish to inquire into some particular component.

The exercises themselves are only examples of the possibilities indicated by the preceding text. Naturally they can be altered, adjusted, made simpler or more complex – and many other exercises inspired by the chapters may be invented. *Free Sessions* – periods of improvisation – should also be held at least once a week, since these provide the best way of digesting the information supplied and turning it into performative material. The clothing worn, the objects used, the items of furniture placed on the space, should all be considered, prior to the free session, together with its lighting. Emphasis should also be placed on the creation of solos, duets and trios, and time allowed to prepare these.

One further consideration. Psychoanalysis has many camps: there's classical theory, ego psychology, Kleinian analysis, personology and process theory – to name but a few of the schisms and developments. Now while I have considerable experience in the field of performance, mine is a lay interest in psychoanalysis, albeit an intense interest, and I wish to make it clear that I find its theorizing stimulating from an artistic, rather than from a therapeutic,

Preface

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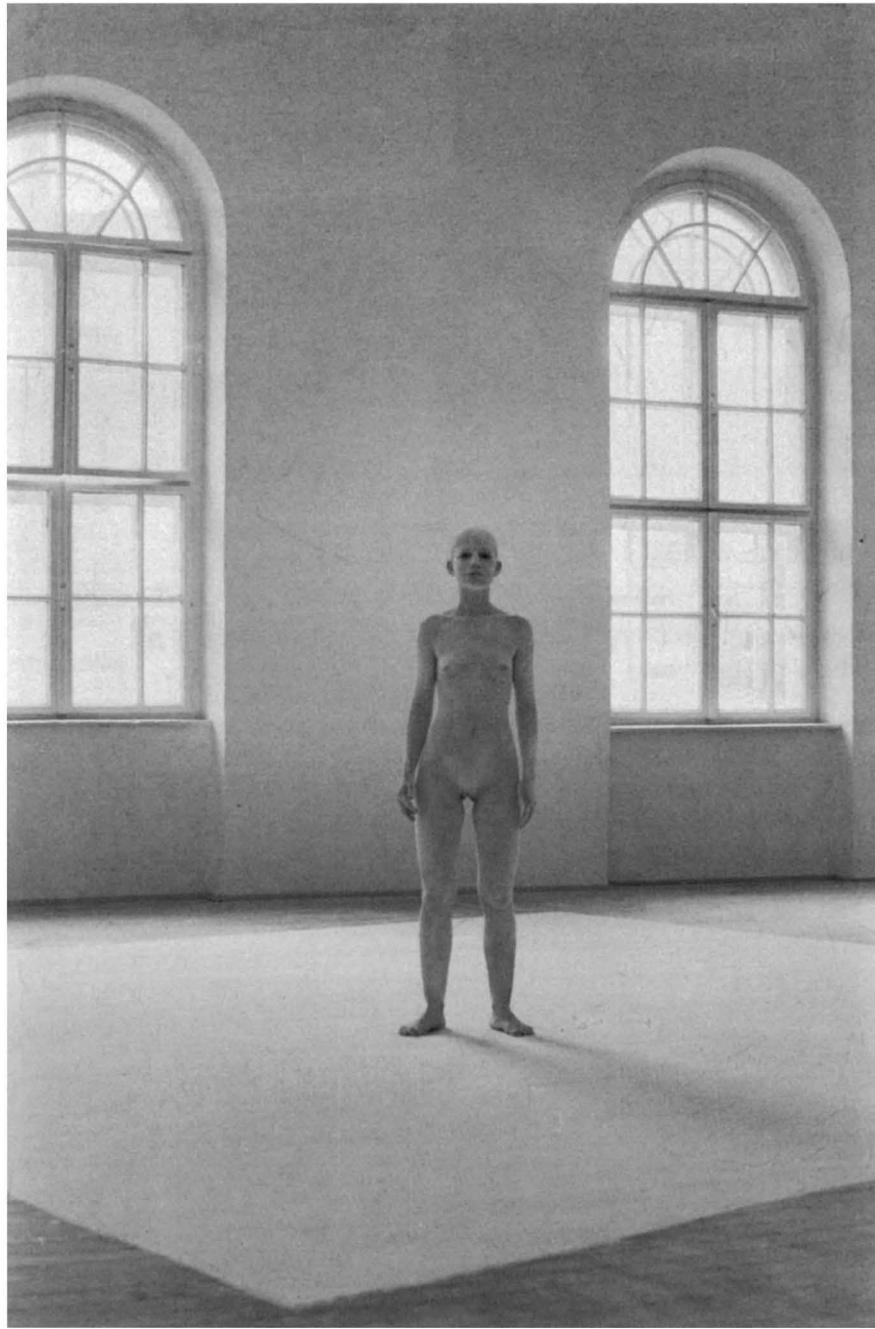
point of view. I have some respect for the thoughts of Lacan, who is nevertheless considered an outsider by more orthodox branches of the movement. Suffice it to say that my grasp of this discipline is imaginative rather than comprehensive and that I would unrepentantly claim that mine was a *creative psychoanalysis*, tailored to the use to which I can put it in the field of performance art.

And so, as often as not, I will take those aspects of my enquiry that pertain to action as a point of departure – to lead us away from the analyst's couch and place us on the performance space. I am as intrigued by the divergences which may be revealed as I am by the parallels between the two fields, and shall often be seeking to contrast the psychical concept with its application in an active sphere. And what eventuates is as much a performer's enquiry into psychoanalysis as it is an analysis of the art of performance.



Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris in a rehearsal for *Site*, a happening by Robert Morris, first performed in New York in 1964. Photograph courtesy of Carolee Schneemann.

Section One of Twelve



Covered in marble dust, Tanja Ostojić stands for two hours in a 5×5 metre square of pulverised marble in *Personal Space*, first shown at the 2nd Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists, Vršac, 1996. Photograph: Saša Gajin.

1

STILLNESS

There's a commonly observed "Zen" content to stillness. This is a stillness gone into itself – a meditative mode. However, there are other ways of being or becoming still. Note these three states:

- A Stillness as arrest
- B Stillness as a state
- C Breaking out of stillness

The *Zen of Stillness* concerns B – a composed state which deepens when one adopts a position which is easy to hold for a long time. The Zen endures, perhaps from the beginning to the end of the piece. Perhaps it begins before the beginning and ends after the audience have gone.

Other notions of stillness emerge. *Arrested Stillness* for instance, when the performer suddenly stops performing, to become engaged in listening or watching. Here the stillness is that of the witness. On stage, in conventional drama, it's common for one person to move or talk while others watch or listen in a position of stasis, their actions arrested or interrupted.

Then there is stillness as *Death or Collapse*. This may often occur after the expenditure of effort. In a dull workshop, this is the commonest, most obvious sort of immobility. One simply lies down on the floor. Limp performers can be dragged into other positions: imagine how the prince may have diverted himself before he actually kissed the Sleeping Beauty. Sleep simulates death, and stillness in a relaxed position performed with the eyes closed will always evoke the dream or the swoon. But there is also the terrifying stillness of *Rigidity*, which may be the tense, static convulsion of madness or the *stiff immobility* of death (as in *Rigor Mortis*).

Death stillness is a non-Zen version of B. But death may suggest or entail rebirth, so another crucial aspect of stillness is C: breaking out of the contained egg of Zen composure, or recovering from or lifting up out of the stillness of death or exhaustion.

Lacan talks about the significance of edges – how sex is not so much the urge to get inside, or the urge to have something within one, so much as the desire to oscillate across the threshold established between inside and outside. Thus the parts which are the landmarks to our entrances are desirable – lips, anus, labia, slit at the tip of the penis, eyelid and ear – but not the liver, not the lungs.

Zen stillness is a continuous drawing-in to the interior, while the stillness of arrest or a stillness which is broken out of are both conditions which lie across the threshold of stillness. *Breaking out of Stillness* implies rebirth.

Note also the difference between "stillness" and "stuckness". For stuckness occurs when arrest is forced or break-out is restrained. Here stillness is imposed on the performer – for example, by ropes or by handcuffs, or by the physical force of other performers. We might call this *Stillness by Restraint*. Such a state of stillness is suffered, as a bird suffers stillness when mesmerized by a snake. This is the stillness of panic, a form of rigidity – the choice of fight or flight stressfully suspended; a state in which one can neither hear nor see, or rather in which one is dazzled or blinded by what one sees, deafened or shocked by what one hears. It's a state akin to hypnosis – a seeing in a frozen state, where some inner vision may be prompted by an outsider or by an outside force.

Physical rigidity, or *rigour*, in performance may read as a catatonic condition; the subject often hiding the hands under the armpits or sitting upon them (poses Breughel uses to depict madness). Here a form of auto-restraint is being practised – the sane part attempting to arrest the unpredictable (and inconsistent) actions of the demented part. Illustrations of patients in lunatic asylums (in Sander Gilman's *Seeing the Insane*) show sufferers from catatonia tying their bodies into knots, or arching to the limit, supported only by head and toes – still perhaps, but very tense indeed in their immobility. Here we have the stillness of the *spasm*, where one muscle is pitted against another as in the performance exercise (and muscle pumping process) referred to as *Dynamic Tension*. This stillness may even start to vibrate (a patina of repetition), which leads to a shuddering, clenching act, probably evoking frustration or rage.

When I was very young, I saw a hypnotist at a fair in France put someone into a rigid, unblinking pose, supposedly a trance. When his arms were lifted away from his sides and released they would slap down tautly against his sides again. The hypnotist was able to write on his subject's eyeballs with a pencil.

The History of Stillness

Performance art emerged out of the "happenings" of the sixties. Stillness was manifest as a key factor in such early experiments since many of these events were devised by visual artists in New York who took the static, two-dimensional image as their starting point. A happening might incorporate a statuesque pose, such as Carolee Schneemann's *Olympia* pose in Robert Morris's *Site*, first performed in 1965. In this piece, the stillness of the pose from Manet's painting provided a contrast to the other artist's active manipulation of the white panels surrounding it.

The notion of becoming a painting, of being a painting incarnate, inspired many of the *tableaux* of previous centuries. Such living images should be part of any history of performance art. In *The Paul Mellon Seminars* 1996-7 – organised by Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon – the significance of Emma Hamilton was emphasised in the development of such posed performances – which were popular in the late eighteenth century.



Emma Hamilton in *The Muse of the Dance* – one of her ‘attitudes’ – etching by Rehberg, courtesy of the British Museum.

Performance art's affinity with visual art rather than theatre can be traced back to the tradition of life-modelling – in which stillness has always been recognised as a skill. Chloe Chard informs us that at the end of the eighteenth century Paolina Borghese, Napoleon's sister, posed in the nude for Canova's sculpture of Venus – and thereafter the Prince, her husband, kept the statue under lock and key! It is Emma Hamilton, however, who turned the art of the model into an art in its own right in the 1790s. In her tableaux, immobility was of short duration, and her attitudes were remarkable for the transitions of mood she was capable of achieving. Chard quotes from the reminiscences of the painter Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun:

"Nothing was more curious than the faculty that Lady Hamilton had acquired of suddenly imparting to all her features the expression of sorrow or joy, and of posing in a wonderful manner in order to represent different characters. Her eye alight with animation, her hair strewn about her, she displayed to you a delicious bacchante, then all at once her face expressed sadness, and you saw an admirable repentant Magdalene."

(*Spectral Souvenirs*, page 4)

Vigée-Lebrun describes these attitudes as 'ce talent d'un nouveau genre'. The new genre was performance art. Emma Hamilton used what might be called 'bursts of stillness'. Deducing an understanding of her attitudes from the descriptions of contemporary writers, Chard notes that;

"Emma dramatically draws attention to the disjunction between the immobility, permanence and aloofness associated with the art of sculpture and the animation of a living human being."

(*Spectral Souvenirs*, page 18)

Robert Wilson's performance tableaux were celebrated for their employment of stillness and slowness in the seventies. In his fine book on Wilson's theatre, *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton*, Janos Pilinsky talks of *le drame immobile* (see Appendix 2). In such drama the suspension of action has more potency than the conventional unfolding of a plot. The issues raised by this immobility are expanded upon in the book. And we will discuss these issues and Wilson's tableaux in more detail when we come to consider repetition and slowness.

Gilbert and George also developed motionlessness in *Underneath the Arches*, their seminal "singing sculpture", first shown in 1969, and shown again two decades later – in 1991 at the Sonnabend Gallery – thus confirming the enduring 'sculptural' status of the piece. In it, the rendition of commonplace formal poses prompted by an exchange of glove and stick, poses appropriate to the formality of the suits worn by the two performers, was punctuated by the need for one of them to descend from the table upon which these poses were displayed in order to turn over the sound-cassette in

the small recorder placed in front of the table. Stick and glove were exchanged and new poses adopted only when the tape was turned, so the length of the tape dictated the length of the pose. There was a certain 'uncanniness' about their brand of stillness. Freud considered automata uncanny, and noticed an ambiguity about the German word *unheimlich* or 'unhomely', which the standard edition of his works translates as 'uncanny', observing that homeliness itself can also exhibit uneasy, eerie qualities – in the same way as we can talk about a witch's fetish creature as her 'familiar'. About such living statuary there is both familiarity and unfamiliarity. What is familiar is that we are clearly observing living humans in precisely everyday poses: what is unfamiliar is their stillness. And it is the tension between these contradictory qualities which produces the uncanny effect. We shall see that repetition seeks to deny the passage of time, and that inconsistency seeks to establish its passage by creating its markers. Stillness may suggest indifference to time – as a memorial may seem indifferent to the changes of the weather. In his fine essay on "*The Uncanny*", which accompanied the exhibition he curated for Sonsbeek 93 in the Gemeentemuseum Arnhem, Mike Kelly points out that there is a memorial quality about statues: they stand on tombs, represent the dead. When the dead object proves 'undead' we experience goose-bumps. Consider the voice of the statue of the murdered commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The utterly lifelike statuary created by the neo-classical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen constitutes his mausoleum, for he is buried in his own museum in Copenhagen.

Tilda Swinton remains still for longer than the duration of an audio-cassette, sleeping through the day in a glass cabinet. The eccentric William Beckford (1760-1844) maintained that sleeping sculptures were more convincing – sleep supplied a reason for their immobility. Tanja Ostojić stands motionless for hours within a square of marble dust. She's completely shaven, and covered in marble dust herself. With life-like sculpture, we doubt whether the material is really inanimate. With living sculpture we doubt whether the being is really alive. There is, after all, a congealing quality about stillness. We speak of a stilled position as a freeze, and indeed there is an aspect to stillness which suggests coldness – not only the coldness of the lake turning to ice but also the coldness of statues, the coldness of stone. Heat speeds up molecules; while stillness suggests their inertia.

Mention should also be made of a piece by Chris Burden, from California, in which Burden remained in the middle section of a three tier locker for several days. The locker above contained sustenance. The locker below was for excretion. Nothing however was seen but the locker with its three closed compartments. The sounds of bodily functions must have occasionally been heard, but otherwise the piece appears to have been entirely still. One could only contemplate the lockers, knowing that someone was inside.

There is more therefore to stillness than "Zen" depth and physical or psychotic entrapment – more to it than arrest and break-out. The above

examples demonstrate the range of this primary action: stillness as a sleep or as a trance, as a painting in corporeal form, as a suspension of the theatrical convention of dialogue and plot development, as indicative of coldness, as an emblem of the enduring quality of sculpture or of the uncanniness of automata – especially after the clockwork movement has ceased or when it suddenly jolts into action – or we can see in stillness a manifestation of sheer physical endurance.

Stillness as a Ground:

It is said that we live in a time / space continuum. In performance art we may consider this a stillness / emptiness continuum. Consider stillness as empty time, into which a performance is to be poured. In the same way, a painter commences with a blank canvas and a composer with a period of silence. These are the grounds upon which their activity occurs. Stretches of blank canvas may remain when the painting is done; just as silence continuously punctuates a musical composition. In a similar manner, the performance emerges out of stillness, stretches of stillness may occur within it, and stillness will punctuate its actions. Before a piece is conceived, a performer starts with an empty space and a durational quantity of stillness within which actions are to occur. Thus stillness may be considered as the ground which persists underneath the other two primaries of action: *repetition* and *inconsistency* (see Figure 1(a)).

During the course of this enquiry we will need to examine each of these primaries in psychoanalytic terms. But let us first tackle an issue raised at this preliminary stage. Does the performer choose to develop the piece in an unfixed durational / spacial amount of still / emptiness by simply *assembling* more and more actions, or does the performer set a limit to the time and a limit to the space and *insert* actions into that defined area?

In general, painters usually insert their painting into a canvas of an already decided size, though of course there are plenty of exceptions to this protocol. Sculptors often assemble. Insertion is a more womblike method, since one's boundaries are already established, while assemblers are akin to the creators of cairns – they can enlarge or diminish their product. In videotape composition, we may note the difference between *assemble* and *insert* editing. Insert editing usually involves separation of sound and vision. Then either the sound-track or the image sequence serves as the spine which is fleshed out by the other element. Such a spine establishes the duration of a video or a performance, just as the canvas defines the size of a painting. Conversely, assemble editing often retains the synchronized unity of sound and image.

Here, though, we need to distinguish between time and stillness. Time is naturally durational, whereas stillness in performative terms is essentially physical. Stillness is *performed*, however immobile it may be. This is why it may be feasible to consider it not as the grounding in time which constitutes the period of the action, but as one of the three primary actions

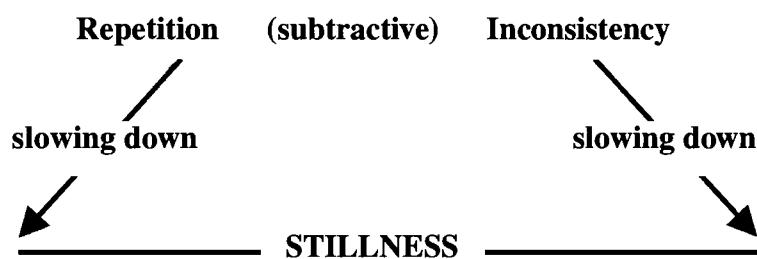


Figure 1(a): Stillness as the ground supporting *repetition* and *inconsistency*

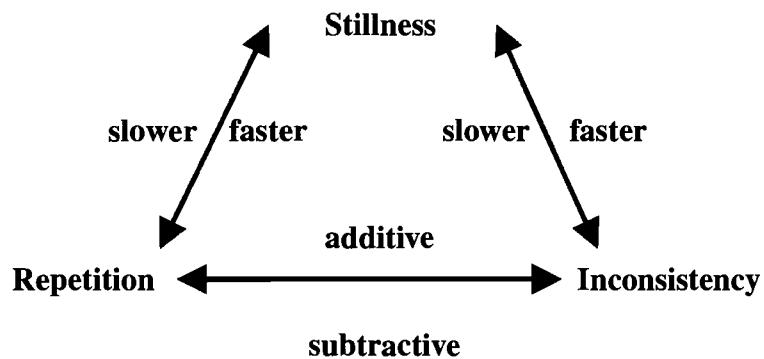


Figure 1(b): Stillness as one of the three primary actions

which may be mixed with each other to create secondary actions (see Figure 1(b)). Stillness is hard to perform if it's more than a supine position. Our bodies are like Plasticine – the poses we set them in tend to 'wilt'. The simplest action can become a strain when stilled and sustained. Any life model knows this – it's another factor which contributes to the uncanniness of an extended freeze.

However, if the stilled human being is the obverse of the humanoid automaton, then Freud would have recognised that stillness can be uncanny just as he noted the uncanny effect of 'silence, darkness and solitude'. There is something here about stillness which claims kinship with the 'lost object' spoken of by Lacan, which we will discuss further in the chapter on our 'objects' (see page 45). Stillness, like the lost object, can also be 'a lack' – for instance, when a gap in the conversation seems uncanny we speak of an angel 'passing over our grave'. This notion reasserts the case for considering stillness as ground, and perhaps the 'lost object' is literally the ground: the ground the child is set down upon, which is not the mother but which supports and stabilizes him in a motherly way, thus becoming The Mother – and this ground is what gets taken away from him when he tries to stand, suffering a precarious loss of horizontal stability – a stability regained perhaps when the subject is returned to the ground at the conclusion of life.

A Note on the shaping of the Project

This enquiry first developed as a course of workshops, and, during the discourse which the sessions entailed, certain diversions occurred. Issues needed to be raised, and initially the nature of the workshops had to be defined. In order to preserve the integrity of the unfolding of these ideas, I feel that it's best to allow these diversions to be articulated as they happened, so as to remain true to the way the course developed – as if it were some live organism needing to relieve itself of niggling tensions. This should preserve its homeostasis. Such a diversion occurs at this point.

In psychoanalysis, there is *the analyst* (who Lacan refers to as "He who is supposed to know"), and there is *the subject*, and then there is the consulting room and the couch.

I asked the students to consider performance art itself as the subject. I told them, *We are the analysts. Our subject is Performance Art*. And then I said that I accepted that within this metaphorical condition I was "he who is supposed to know" (or "he who is supposed to know most"), coming into the performance space with my own strong projection onto the event.

* * * *

Where are we in this space, prior to our performance? And where are we when we are not performing? Where shall we sit, stand, crouch or perch initially, and perhaps after that as a matter of custom (as if forever)? Where indeed shall we place ourselves to be as forgotten-to-be-there as the analyst?

Since there is no audience other than ourselves in this workshop, and we are also to be performers, we are, in phylogenetic terms, in the position of the chorus in an ancient Greek drama. We are the active witnesses, performing our arrested stillness before the event which may unfold.

While you read this, imagine that we are working in front of a tall white wall with a black curtain hiding us. Suppose that the studio is a larger area than that sectioned off by the curtain. You are one of the performers. Imagine now that the audience will be there if we drop the curtains, and that they will see *us watching* at the same time as they watch the performance.

At present there is only *us watching*; us watching what we are to make out of ourselves. Thus the subject is performance: the analysts are ourselves – positioned in *arrested stillness*, each being both a performer and a place from which to watch what may occur – until we decide to participate in that occurrence (if we are not already doing so by watching it). Here, initially, we define the space by these curtains, and define the performance by where we watch the space from, and define the time it takes by how long we have to watch it in. And in so far as these parameters are defined, the performance will be an insertion within them.

This highlights an obvious problem. Painters begin with a canvas, video-makers with a camera. The performance artist often feels that he or she *begins with a lack*, an absence of what is to occur. One needs to remember though that one's own body is an instrument and that a space and a time is a ground as tangible as any canvas.

How we get to where we wish to perform from our watching place and how we get back again is a matter for consideration. But our *watching* is indeed part of the performance and integral to its making. Certainly the vantage point a painter chooses to observe his painting from will affect the painted result. In our case, our witnessing position is emphatically a “stance” which affects the subject, just as the analyst is indeed part of the analysand. In performance art, one is artist and artwork at the same time. Thus the issue of the ‘subject’ and its identity is permeated with ambiguity.

Witnessing is a condition of stillness as arrest (and only one of the states of stillness). Moreover, it's a condition that involves listening as well as watching. What, then, do we look like? What, then, do we sound like, in this preliminary stillness in which we look, listen and consider our appearance? In the emptiness of this preliminary stillness there is no performance except us looking, and in this there is already a fullness.

The Reading of Stillness

Stillness enables a reading of the performance piece which is more akin to the way we read a painting than to the way we read a conventional play. When a still tableau is presented, the audience is not required to “follow” the action. They read the scene at their own pace, and the eye travels as it wills, upwards, downwards, across in either direction. When we follow a

drama, on the other hand, we are given little time to develop our own thoughts. Instead, we are the receivers of the piece. Our thoughts about it occur in its intervals or after the final curtain. In front of a painting, we develop our own thoughts, and this is an active form of contemplation which the canvas stimulates. We develop our own thoughts also when we look at sculpture. Very often, the emphasis on stillness in a piece of performance art enables this active process to occur in the spectator. If we were to confront the lockers which contained Chris Burden we would have little else to work with other than our own mental observations. Because the spectator is not drawn along like a fish on the end of a hook, performance art retains a kinship with the plastic arts which initially fostered its development. It retains this kinship most specifically perhaps with the art of sculpture. This is why even the most progressive theatre critics have difficulties with performance. They are more used to following a play than to reading a performance. Stillness is probably the key factor which brought about this difference between performance and theatre, between reading the presented text and developing a mental *subtext* during the event.

Stillness enables such a drift of the mind across its surface. It opens up existence to meditation. In conclusion, let us not underestimate this quality of the *Zen* of stillness. *Zen* of course was mentioned at the outset, but only briefly. Why labour the point, now stillness and the lotus-position have become a cliché? However it is a cliché worth deconstructing. Since time immemorial stillness has been a method for attaining spiritual enlightenment. Stillness is the contemplative being-in-itself of Karl Jaspers, the existentialist; a state opposed to that of being-there, the arena of science, whose repetitive discoveries bring no unity or wholeness, only more accuracy and more detail. Being there is escaped, and being-in-itself arrived at, only through being-on oneself. Could a link now be forged between inconsistency and being-on oneself?

More recently, in *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have spoken of the body-without-organs, an idealised state of equilibrium relieved from the pressures of the machinery associated with production and demand. Stillness, ultimately, is that body without organs; that carapace: the shell of the turtle; its vehicle, which it moves. To enter its shell, the turtle must pull back its head, withdraw its feet, regress from the world. Perhaps this is why primal psychic repression is like a bump on the nose, a violent inconsistency, like the lightning that changed Saul into Paul. A sudden catastrophe rips us out of the humdrum world into a state of shock, inertia or enlightened meditation. The *Zen* of stillness is forever balanced by that other stillness which is death.

The Stillness Workshop

1. Primary Stillness

After a clap, there is a silence for some fifteen ‘internal counts’. Then one performer enters the space and freezes in any position. The stillness of the silence is allowed to deepen. Then a second performer enters the space and freezes in any position. Again the stillness of the silence is allowed to deepen. Subsequent performers enter one at a time, in each case after a deepening interval, and freeze also. When the last performer enters he or she says “I’m the last”, before freezing in turn. The stillness is again allowed to deepen, and then the first performer leaves the space, followed, after a deepening interval, by the second performer, and so on, until the last performer is the only one on the space. After another interval of stillness and silence, he or she also quits the space.

2. Stillness Repetitions

Essentially the same exercise as the one above, only this time each performer entering after the first performer has a choice either to repeat a pose already taken up on the performance space or to adopt a fresh one.

3. Sculptures and Armatures

Performers enter the space one at a time. Each becomes frozen, either as sculptural object, or as a support for another performer. Thus performers may adopt stable positions others may utilize or utilize such stable positions as their supports. Last performer to enter says “I’m the last”. Stillness prevails until any one performer breaks out of stillness, making some regular noise to signify movement while walking around the still arrangements contemplating his or her next freeze. On freezing again, either as armature or as sculpture supported by an armature, he or she ceases making that regular noise, and then any other performer is free to break out of stillness. However, there should only be one performer moving and making a regular noise at any one time. If two break out of stillness at the same time, both freeze and miss that chance to move.

4. Dynamic Spasms

Each performer claps and throws the body into an unpremeditated position. Dynamic tension – pitting one set of muscles against another set – is then exerted until the entire pose starts to vibrate with the tension. This tension is very gradually relaxed and gradually the performer sinks to the floor, eventually finding the most relaxed position possible. The performer then goes into spasm again on the floor, holds the spasm for as long as possible, relaxes again and then allows the relaxed stillness to deepen.

Then the performer quietly gets up and repeats the entire exercise.

5. Stuckness

Choose the tallest/strongest member of the group. All the others attempt to restrain his/her movements by any means possible – until the movements of that targeted performer are completely stilled.

6. Stillness Free Session

Improvisation period, utilising only entrances, freezes and exits, though there may be transitions from one freeze to another – after a pose proves impossible to sustain. There may also be preparations for immobility – consider the use of ropes, handcuffs, suspension. Performers should consider the variety of possibilities: figurative poses (friezes), dynamic shapes, spasms, constraints (which might employ methods of binding the performer), repetitions of observed poses, oppositions to observed poses etc.

Stillness should be considered the ground of any subsequent free session. Often a free session is best begun after a minute's silence, a minute's immobility.

7. Stillness as Arrest, Coming to a Halt, Bursting out of Stillness

Performers divide into two groups. One group keeps walking at one end of the studio. The other group wait and watch. Then one performer in the watching group calls the name of one performer in the walking group. Immediately that performer stops walking and simultaneously turns to lock gazes with the caller. One at a time, each performer in the watching group calls the name of a walker – with the same effect.

After having arrested a performer in the walking group, each caller walks forward in silence towards that performer, never taking his/her eyes off the eyes of the performer called. The walk must become slower and slower, so that by the time the caller is very close indeed to the called performer the movement forward is practically imperceptible.

No acknowledgement should occur on making contact – the arrested performer remaining in the arrested position, the caller simply coming to a stop. But after a longish pause, both performers should burst out of their stillness, breaking contact.



Living eyes stare out from a pillow on a hospital bed in Steven Taylor Woodrow's *Going Bye-Byes*, Leeds City Art Gallery, 1991.

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