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# THE PERFORMATIVITY OF PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

Philip Auslander

Consider two familiar images from the history of performance and body art: one from the documentation of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), the notorious piece for which the artist had a friend shoot him in a gallery, and Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960), which shows the artist jumping out of a second-story window into the street below. It is generally accepted that the first image is a piece of performance documentation, but what is the second? Burden really was shot in the arm during *Shoot*, but Klein did not really jump unprotected out the window, the ostensible performance documented in his equally iconic image. What difference does it make to our understanding of these images in relation to the concept of performance documentation that one documents a performance that "really" happened while the other does not? I shall return to this question below.

As a point of departure for my analysis here, I propose that performance documentation has been understood to encompass two categories, which I shall call the *documentary* and the *theatrical*. The documentary category represents the traditional way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is conceived. It is assumed that the documentation of the performance event provides both a record of it through which it can be reconstructed (though, as Kathy O'Dell points out, the reconstruction is bound to be fragmentary and incomplete<sup>1</sup>) and evidence that it actually occurred. The connection between performance and document is thus thought to be ontological, with the event preceding and authorizing its documentation. Burden's performance documentation, as well as most of the documentation of classic performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s, belongs to this category.

Although it is generally taken for granted, the presumption of an ontological relationship between performance and document in this first model is ideological. The idea of the documentary photograph as a means of accessing the reality of the performance derives from the general ideology of photography, as described by Helen Gilbert, glossing Roland Barthes and Don Slater: "Through its trivial realism, photography creates the illusion of such exact correspondence between the signifier and the signified that it appears to be the perfect instance of Barthes's 'message without a code.' The 'sense of the photograph as not only representationally accurate but ontologically

connected to the real world allows it to be treated as a piece of the real world, then as a substitute for it.”<sup>2</sup> (In relation to Slater’s notion that the photograph ultimately substitutes for reality, it is worth considering whether performance recreations based on documentation actually recreate the underlying performances or perform the documentation. *Poor Theatre* (2004), in which the Wooster Group recreates performances by Jerzy Grotowski and William Forsythe, and Marina Abramovic’s reenactments of other artists’s performances in *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) are recent examples of work that clearly play with this slippery question.

Jon Erickson suggests that the use of black and white photography in classic performance documentation enhances photography’s reality effect (for Erickson, color photographs assert themselves more strongly as objects in their own right). “There is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white, which points to the idea that documentation is really only a supplement to a performance having to do with context, space, action, ideas, of which the photograph is primarily a reminder.”<sup>3</sup> Amelia Jones takes up the idea of the documentary photograph as a supplement to the performance to challenge the ontological priority of the live performance. She offers a sophisticated analysis of “the mutual supplementarity of . . . performance or body art and the photographic document. (The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological ‘anchor’ of its indexicality.)”<sup>4</sup> While this formulation questions the performance’s status as the originary event by suggesting the mutual dependence of performance and document (the performance is originary only insofar as it is documented), it also reaffirms the status of the photograph as an access point to the reality of the performance, a position on which Jones must insist since she argues it to defend her own practice of writing about performances she never saw in the flesh (a situation with which I am in complete sympathy).

In the theatrical category, I would place a host of art works of the kind sometimes called “performed photography,” ranging from Marcel Duchamp’s photos of himself as Rose Selavy to Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself in various guises to Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* films. Other recent examples include the work of Gregory Crewdson and Nikki Lee. These are cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document (whether visual or audiovisual) thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs. Klein’s *Leap* belongs to this category. Klein had no audience apart from “close friends and photographers” when he jumped (which he did several times, “attempting to get the desired transcendent expression on his face”) and used a protective net that does not appear in the photograph, which is actually a composite of two different shots unified in the darkroom.<sup>5</sup> (It is an open question whether the friends were there to witness a performance or a photo shoot—in either case, they did not see the event depicted in the photograph.) The image we see thus records an event that never took place except in the photograph itself.

From a traditional perspective, the documentary and theatrical categories are mutually exclusive. If one insists upon the ontological relationship by demanding that, to qualify as a performance, an event must have an autonomous existence prior to its documentation, then the events underlying the works in the second category are not performances at all and the images are not documents, but something else, another kind of art work perhaps (the phrase “performed photography,” for instance, suggests that such works be understood as a kind of photograph rather than as performances). Erickson gestures toward such a position (without actually adopting it) in his review of Roselee Goldberg’s book *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* when he poses the question: “does [the book] defeat its own premise when it includes the ‘performed photography’ of Cindy Sherman, video, film stills (Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster*), and even the drawings and sculptures of Robert Longo?”<sup>6</sup> Since these are all recordings of one sort or another, how can they qualify as “live” art?

From a different perspective, however, the two categories appear to have much in common. Although it is true that the theatrical images in the second category either had no significant audience other than the camera or could have had no such audience (because they never took place in real space), it is equally true that the images in *both* categories were staged for the camera. Although some of the early documentation of performance and body art was not carefully planned or conceived as such, performance artists who were interested in preserving their work quickly became fully conscious of the need to stage it for the camera as much as for an immediately present audience, if not more so. They were well aware of what Jones describes as performance’s “dependence on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture.”<sup>7</sup> Burden, for example, “carefully staged each performance and had it photographed and sometimes also filmed; he selected usually one or two photographs of each event for display in exhibitions and catalogs . . . . In this way, Burden produced himself for posterity through meticulously orchestrated textual and visual representations.”<sup>8</sup> As another example, the European body artist Gina Pane describes the role of photography in her work in the following terms: “It creates the work the audience will be seeing afterwards. So the photographer is not an external factor, he is positioned inside the action space with me, just a few centimeters away. There were times when he obstructed the [audience’s] view!”<sup>9</sup>

It is clear, then, that such archetypal works of performance and body art as Burden’s and Pane’s were not autonomous performances whose documentation supplements and provides access to an originary event. Rather, the events were staged to be documented at least as much as to be seen by an audience; as Pane observes, sometimes the process of documentation actually interfered with the initial audience’s ability to perceive the performance. In this respect, no documented piece is performed solely as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation, the final product through which it will be circulated and with which it will inevitably become identified, justifying Slater’s claim that the photograph ultimately replaces the reality it documents (or, as O’Dell puts it, “performance art is the virtual equivalent of its representations”<sup>10</sup>). In the end, the only significant difference between the documentary and theatrical modes of performance documentation is

ideological: the assumption that in the former mode, the event is staged primarily for an immediately present audience and that the documentation is a secondary, supplementary record of an event that has its own prior integrity. As I have shown here, this belief has little relation to the actual circumstances under which performances are made and documented.

Before drawing conclusions about these issues, I shall place one more piece of evidence into the mix: a performance by Vito Acconci entitled *Photo-Piece* (1969) that raises some trenchant questions about the relationship between performance and documentation.<sup>11</sup> Acconci's verbal description of the performance is simple: "Holding a camera, aimed away from me and ready to shoot, while walking a continuous line down a city street. Try not to blink. Each time I blink: snap a photo." The documentation of the piece displays a grid of 12 black and white photographs of a fairly desolate stretch of Greenwich Street in New York City above the verbal instruction. Like many of Acconci's performances of this time, *Photo-Piece* was premised on failure, since it is obviously impossible that Acconci could walk down a street for any length of time without blinking.<sup>12</sup> It also has to do with achieving a high level of self-consciousness in mundane circumstances, as Acconci must become hyper-aware of an autonomic function (and perhaps equally aware of his surroundings) as he walks. Furthermore, as artist Seth Price has suggested to me, Acconci was making art out of nothing, an art without content.

This performance confounds the already shaky distinction between the categories of documentary and theatrical images. On the one hand, the photos Acconci produced serve the traditional functions of performance documentation: they provide evidence that he actually performed the piece and allow us to reconstruct his performance. They do not do so in the traditional manner, however, because they do not actually show Acconci performing: they are photographs *by* Acconci, taken while performing, not photographs *of* Acconci performing. They partake of the traditional ontology of performance documentation nevertheless. Since the action of the piece consisted of taking photographs, the existence of the photographs serves as the primary evidence that Acconci executed his own instructions: because the photographs were produced *as* (or perhaps *by*) the performance (rather than *of* the performance), the ontological connection between performance and document seems exceptionally tight in this case.

On the other hand, Acconci's performance was also very like those in the theatrical category inasmuch as it was not available to an audience in any form apart from its documentation. A look at the photographs shows that the street was deserted—there were no bystanders to serve as audience. More importantly, the only thing bystanders would have seen was a man walking and taking pictures: they would have had no way of understanding they were witnessing a performance. Acconci's photographs thus are more theatrical than documentary, for it is only through his documentation that his performance exists *qua* performance.

Acconci's *Photo-Piece* points toward a central issue: the performativity of documentation itself. I am using the term performative in J. L. Austin's most basic sense. Speaking of language, Austin calls statements whose utterance constitutes action in itself *performatives* (e.g., saying "I do" in a marriage ceremony). Distinguishing performative utterances from constative utterances, Austin argues that "to utter [a performative sentence] is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it."<sup>13</sup> If I may analogize the images that document performances with verbal statements, the traditional view sees performance documents as constatives that describe performances and state that they occurred. I am suggesting that performance documents are not analogous to constatives, but to performatives: in other words, *the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such*. Documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred: it produces an event as a performance and, as Frazer Ward suggests, the performer as "artist."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps this point will be clearer when articulated to a straightforward definition of performance such as Richard Bauman's:

Briefly stated, I understand performance as a mode of communicative display, in which the performer signals to an audience, in effect, "hey, look at me! I'm on! watch how skillfully and effectively I express myself." That is to say, performance rests on an assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative virtuosity. [. . .] In this sense of performance, then, the act of expression itself is framed as display: objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to interpretive and evaluative scrutiny by an audience both in terms of its intrinsic qualities and its associational resonances. [. . .] The specific semiotic means by which the performer may key the performance frame—that is, send the metacommunicative message "I'm on"—will vary from place to place and historical period to historical period. [. . .] The collaborative participation of an audience, it is important to emphasize, is an integral component of performance as an interactional accomplishment.<sup>15</sup>

I will not discuss the issues of skill and communicative virtuosity as they apply to performance and body art here, except to say that in an earlier consideration of Acconci's work, I observed, "critical standards for 'body art' are hard to articulate."<sup>16</sup> The virtuosity of this kind of performance, as well as most performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s, clearly does not reside in the performer's mastery of conventional performance skills: perhaps it resides in the originality and audacity of conception and execution.

Bauman's other points concerning the framing of an event as performance and the concept of responsibility to the audience are directly germane to *Photo-Piece*, however. Since there was no audience for the "live" performance and the event was not framed as performance for whatever accidental audience may have been

present (that is, Acconci provided no metacommunication to tell that audience he was performing, not just walking and taking pictures) it is solely through the documentation that Acconci's actions are "framed as display" and "lifted out . . . from [their] contextual surroundings." It was also through the acts of documenting and presenting the documentation that Acconci assumed responsibility to an audience. It is crucial that the audience in question is the one that perceived his actions solely by means of the documentation rather than the incidental audience that may have seen him walking and photographing on Greenwich Street. It is this documentation—and nothing else—that allows an audience to interpret and evaluate his actions as a performance.

I realize that Acconci's performance is a special case but it is not as special as it may seem. All of the works in the theatrical category I posited earlier have the same relationship to performance as *Photo-Piece*: In all cases, the actions undertaken by the artist and depicted in the images become available to an audience as performances solely through their documentation, and it is by virtue of presenting the photographs of their actions that the artists frame the depicted actions as performances and assume responsibility to the audience. As with the Acconci piece, the audience to whom they assume responsibility is the audience for the documentation, not for the live event.

The performances in the documentary category work differently, at least to an extent, because they generally have a dual existence: they are framed as performances by being presented in galleries or by other means and there is an initial audience to which the performer assumes responsibility as well as a second audience that experiences the performance only through its documentation. But this difference is much less substantial than it may appear. Consider the status of the initial audience with respect to documentation. Whereas sociologists and anthropologists who discuss performance stipulate, like Bauman, that the presence of the audience and the interaction of performers and audience is a crucial part of any performance, the tradition of performance art documentation is based on a different set of assumptions. It is very rare that the audience is documented at anything like the same level of detail as the art action. The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the *artist's work* available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an "interactional accomplishment" to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions. For the most part, scholars and critics use eyewitness accounts to ascertain the characteristics of the performance, not the audience's contribution to the event, and discussions of how a particular audience perceived a particular performance at a particular time and place and what that performance meant to that audience are rare.<sup>17</sup> In that sense, performance art documentation participates in the fine art tradition of the reproduction of *works* rather than the ethnographic tradition of capturing *events*.<sup>18</sup>

I submit that the presence of that initial audience has no real importance to the performance as an entity whose continued life is through its documentation because our usual concern as consumers of such documentation is with recreating the artist's



work, not the total interaction. As a thought experiment, consider what would happen were we to learn that there actually was no audience for Chris Burden's *Shoot*, that he simply performed the piece in an empty gallery and documented it. I suggest that such a revelation would make no difference at all to our perception of the performance, our understanding of it as an object of interpretation and evaluation, and our assessment of its historical significance. In other words, while the presence of an initial audience may be important to performers, it is merely incidental to the performance as documented. As the statement from Gina Pane I quoted earlier makes abundantly clear, when artists decide to document their performances, they assume responsibility to an audience other than the initial one, a gesture that ultimately obviates the need for an initial audience (which, in Pane's case, could not really participate fully as an audience because of the exigencies of documentation). In the long run, it makes no more difference whether there actually was a physically present audience for *Shoot* or any number of other classic works of performance art than it does whether someone happened to see Acconci on Greenwich Street or wandered into the studio while Cindy Sherman was shooting one of her disguised self-portraits. In that sense, it is not the initial presence of an audience that makes an event a work of performance art: it is its framing as performance through the performative act of documenting it as such.

I return now to the question I posed at the beginning: What difference does the fact that the image of Chris Burden documents something that really happened and the image of Yves Klein does not make to our understanding of these images in relation to the concept of performance documentation? My answer: If we are concerned with the historical constitution of these events as performances, it makes no difference at all. It follows from my assertion that the identity of documented performances as performances is not dependent on the presence of an initial audience that we cannot dismiss studio fabrications of one sort or another from the category of performance art because they were not performed for a physically present audience. My suggestion that performance art is constituted as such through the performativity of its documentation is equally true for both Burden's piece and Klein's. The fact that one could and did occur before a live audience while the other could not and did not is not a significant difference in this context. This also seems to be the case in more pragmatic terms: this difference between the images has had no consequence in terms of their iconicity and standing in the history of art and performance.

If we are concerned not just with the determination of what makes an event a performance, but also with the notion of authenticity in performance, then the distinction between the two images may seem more significant. I alluded earlier to a position that would treat the Klein photograph as something other than a performance because it documents an event that never actually occurred as we see it in the image. This position seems to me ultimately untenable, however. If I may be permitted an analogy with another cultural form, to argue that Klein's leap was not a performance because it took place only within photographic space would be equivalent to arguing that the Beatles did not perform the music on their *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album because that performance exists only in the



space of the recording: the group never actually performed the music as we hear it.<sup>19</sup> I would consider any such claim absurd: Of course the Beatles performed that music—how else are to understand it if not as a performance by the Beatles? And of course Yves Klein performed his jump.

Those who are particularly concerned with recorded music have discussed the whole question of the relationship between performance and its documentation extensively. The two basic categories of that discussion are similar to the ones I have posited here: *documentary* and *phonography*, where documentary recordings are assumed to be straightforward capturings of real sonic events and phonography consists in the “sonic manipulation” of music to produce recordings of performances that never really happened that way. Lee B. Brown, an American philosopher who has addressed these issues, suggests that phonography produces “works of phonoart,” a new category of “musical entities” to be considered in their own terms as art works distinct from traditional musical performances.<sup>20</sup>

This is a version of an argument I have already rejected, of course, since Brown solves the problem of the relationship between performances and documentation by insisting that phonography, the aural equivalent of the performed photography I have been discussing, is not a form of performance but constitutes a new kind of musical event altogether. For me, by contrast, phonoart is a species of musical performance, albeit a species that exists only in the space of recording. But Brown acknowledges an important point: that the phenomenological boundaries between documentary and phonography are blurry: it is not always clear “whether a given product is to be understood as a piece of phonoart or a transparent document of a performance.” He cites as an example “the albums of ‘duets’ that Frank Sinatra recorded a few years before his death. They *sound* documentary” even though Sinatra never actually sang with his partners and “the impression of two singers in dialogue with one another is sheer illusion.”<sup>21</sup>

One could say exactly the same thing about the Klein photograph: It *looks* documentary even though the impression that Klein leapt unprotected from the window is sheer illusion. At the phenomenal level, there is not necessarily any intrinsic way of determining whether a particular performance image is documentary or theatrical. And even if one does know, precisely what difference does that knowledge make? Are we deprived of the pleasure of hearing Sinatra sing with his duet partners because he did not actually do that? Similarly, is our appreciation of Klein’s image of himself leaping into the void sullied by the fact that he erased the safety net from the photograph? Can we not appreciate Sherman’s particular ways of embodying an enormous range of characters and images because we never have direct access to her performing body? If we are to insist on a criterion of authenticity when contemplating performance documentation, we must ask ourselves whether we believe authenticity to reside in the circumstances of the underlying performance, which may or may not be evident from the documentation.

Brown implies another possibility worth considering: that the crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance but the one between the document and its audience. Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological. Just as one can have the pleasure of hearing Sinatra sing duets with singers with whom he had no real interaction, so one can have the pleasure of seeing Klein leap into the void or that of contemplating the implications of Burden's allowing himself to be shot. These pleasures are available from the documentation and therefore do not depend on whether an audience witnessed the original event. The more radical possibility is that they may not even depend on whether the event actually happened. It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.

## NOTES

1. Kathy O'Dell, "Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s." *Performance Research* 2, 1 (1997): 73–74.

2. Helen Gilbert, "Bodies in Focus: Photography and Performativity in Post-Colonial Theatre." *Textual Studies in Canada* 10–11 (1998): 18.

3. Jon Erickson, "Goldberg Variations: Performing Distinctions." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21, 3 (1999): 98.

4. Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation." *Art Journal* 56, 4 (1997): 16.

5. Amelia Jones, "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform their Masculinities," *Art History* 17, 4 (1994): 554. Jones points out that Klein actually exposed the theatricality of his image by publishing two different versions of it, one with a bicyclist on the street and one without, thus tacitly revealing its constructed nature.

6. Erickson, 99.

7. Jones, "Presence," 13.

8. Jones, "Dis/playing the Phallus," 568.

9. Quoted in O'Dell, 76–77.

10. O'Dell, 77.

11. Some might take exception to my categorizing Acconci's work as performance. While it is true that his work from this period is often classified under the rubric of conceptual art (and could also be considered process art) I make no apology for claiming it for performance. I am hardly the only one to do so: O'Dell, for instance, includes Acconci in the category of performance art without comment. Frazer Ward (see note 14) argues that the two categories should be seen as intertwined and engaged in an ongoing dialogue rather than as distinct.

12. For a brief discussion of the centrality of predictable failure to Acconci's work, see Philip Auslander, "Vito Acconci and the Politics of the Body in Postmodern Performance." In *From Acting to Performance*. London: Routledge, 1997, 89–97.

13. J. L. Austin, "Lecture I in *How to Do Things with Words*." In *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, volume I, edited by Philip Auslander. London: Routledge, 2003, 93.

14. Frazer Ward, "Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art." *Art Journal* 56, 4 (1997): 40.

15. Richard Bauman, *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality*. Malden: Blackwell, 2004, 9.

16. Auslander, 96.

17. This observation is intended only to mark disciplinary differences, not to suggest that the ethnographic bent of performance studies provides a superior perspective on performance than the fine art tradition embedded in art history.

18. To speak of *recreating* a performance suggests the reconstruction of an object. By contrast, the term *revival* used in English to describe theatrical productions of existing plays suggests the reawakening of an organic entity rather than the rebuilding of a lost object.

19. For a brief discussion of the idea that recordings constitute the primary experience of music in a mediatised society and that such recordings must be understood as performances in themselves, see Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14.1 (2004): 5. I am suggesting that the cultural situation of performance art is similar to that of popular music: that its audience experiences it primarily through documentation, rather than live performance, and that the documents effectively become the performances.

20. Lee B. Brown, "Phonography." In *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, 2nd Edition, edited by David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2005, 214, 216.

21. Brown, 216.

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