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Performance, Choreography, and the Gallery:

Materiality, Attention, Agency, Sensation, and Instability

This issue of *Performance Paradigm*, focusing on "Performance, Choreography and the Gallery," takes the 2016 Biennale of Sydney (BoS20) as a starting point. The Biennale featured scores of performances that ranged across of a variety of genres (one-to-one, live art, theatre, dance, opera, installations, walks, talks, and tours) and a variety of sites (libraries, galleries, post-industrial halls, inner city streets, and harbour islands). The Biennale's artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal and two of her 'curatorial attachés', Adrian Heathfield and André Lepecki, have been working at this intersection for years, along with curators such as Pierre Bal Blanc, Catherine Wood and Mathieu Copeland. So too have scholars such as Claire Bishop (2012; 2014), Shannon Jackson (2011), Amelia Jones (1998; 2012) and Susan Bennett (2009). We will not attempt a survey of that field here, suffice to say that the research presented in what follows refers to much of this seminal work.

This collection of articles and artist pages seeks to engage with the performance dimension of a sprawling, international art event and related work outside the Biennale, along with the associated field of literature. The articles proceed primarily through female case studies such as Alex Martinis Roe, Shelley Lasica, Noa Eshkol, The Brown Council, Mette Edvardsen and Julie-Anne Long, and link the work of such artists to major themes circulating in this field. Of the many themes covered in this writing—including practice, choreography, labour, ethics, discipline, collaboration, visuality, power, spectatorship—we choose materiality, attention, agency, sensation and instability to frame this introduction.

Besides the high number of female artists and writers included in this journal, another noteworthy aspect of this collection is that the majority of these articles and artist pages refer to work that involves dance and choreography, although not all refer to works from BoS20. This reflects two discursive events that provided space and time for reflection within the Biennale, both co-hosted by the Biennale of Sydney and the School of the Arts and Media, University of New South Wales, Sydney: *Choreography and the Gallery: A One-Day Salon* (Art Gallery of NSW, April 27, 2016); and *Mini-Symposium: Performance*

Talks, (UNSW Sydney, May 23, 2016). These events brought artists, choreographers, curators, writers, and thinkers together to present their practical or theoretical research engaging with this intermedial field, both within the BoS20 and beyond.

Materiality: Dance Is Ephemeral, Art Is Material

My relationship to dance is … directly responsible for my new interest in the spectator's active role. I learned that a work of art—say, a painting or a piece of sculpture, is an elusive quantity—that is, the fact that it's concrete makes it elusive. The dance, on the other hand—is *really* concrete, not elusive at all. … both parties are in a critical relationship in terms of immediacy and spontaneity. They combine to create a living, palpable force of contact.—Robert Rauschenberg (quoted in Gruen 1966, 34)

In this comment from American artist Robert Rauschenberg, speaking in 1966 amid an important historical incursion of performance into the visual arts scene, we have an inversion of the "ephemeral dance" versus "material arts" opposition. For Rauschenberg, the dancing body is not "elusive" because it consists of the same materiality as the spectator, thus facilitating a "palpable force of contact" between these two material fields. A painting, on the other hand, is "elusive" in its particular materiality. Many of the artists of this period would pay close attention to the materiality of painting, reducing it, expanding it, investing it with force and action, extending it out into the space beyond the flat plane. This expansive approach to painting led many to work with performance and dance as a logical extension of these interests. The materiality of the dancing body can achieve a force and impact that Rauschenberg finds only approximated in the painting and sculpture of his time. It is not elusive; as Cunningham says, "what the dancer does is the most realistic of all things" (Cunningham 1997, 66).

Theron Schmidt's article, "What Kind of Work is This? Performance and Materialisms in the Gallery," opens the journal and expands the discussion of art and materiality beyond the kinds of dualisms suggested in Rauschenberg's words, to include the material of the Biennale more broadly: its catalogues, sponsors, and venues as well as the questions of value and agency that such an expansion raises. "Translation" between materials or media become the subject in Sally Gardner's "Noa Eshkol in the Sydney Biennale: A Translation," where information moves across and between textiles, notation technologies, dancing and community in this multi-disciplinary artist's work. In Rea Dennis's "River | Body | Walk: A Choreographic Arrival," the materiality of the site is all-important in a creative project engaging with migration, flow and mapping.

Attention: "How Are the People?"

Reading Harold Rosenberg describing the new viewer experience for gallery attendees in his famous 1952 essay, "American Action Painters," he could be describing the typical dance spectator: "Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and

relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked" (Rosenberg 1952, 22).

The new conditions that mid-century American artists created for audiences were also recorded by Argentinian poet and critic Rafael Squirra in 1966. He wrote: "It is a matter of equipping [the viewer] with elements that in some way enrich the state of consciousness, so that when he confronts the untranslatable aesthetic fact he can do so with a better tuned receiving apparatus" (Squirra 1966, 29). These new corporeal, action-based, material experiences in the visual arts emerged out of an intensely intermedial milieu. Modes of making and watching owed much to the fields of theatre, performance and dance as acknowledged by John Cage, Michael Fried, Yvonne Rainer and many others.

In Rebecca Hilton's text, "DANCERNESS," she refers to artists such as Maria Hassabi, La Ribot, and Ralph Lemon who she says, "follow in the fine tradition of Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown … The work of each of these artists, contains a specifically framed opportunity for heightened noticing." New modes of spectatorship, with special requirements regarding attention (where, for how long, what kind) are emerging from the performance-gallery nexus, and cultivating new modes of encounter. These are described in Fayen d'Evie's account of her work and its engagement of the "peripheral" senses in "Orienting Through Blindness: Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods," and Julie-Anne Long's interest in invisibility in her description of her performance as a cleaner in "Tactical Moves in Strategic Places: Performing *Val, The Invisible* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia."

Agency: Collaboration and Context

Collaboration

13 Rooms, an exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach and presented in Sydney in April 2013, raised many issues around performer agency in performance-based works exhibited in galleries. During the course of the exhibition, a cast of around 100 performers realised works by artists such as Marina Abramović (*Luminosity*, 1997) and Joan Jonas (*Mirror Check*, 1970). Often these artists were treated as exchangeable "bodies for hire," overlooking any singularities and suppressing artist agency, and were barely credited for their work.[1] This presents a striking contrast with the mid-20th century scene in New York, where an important aspect of the collective making was the irreplaceability of performers. Rauschenberg states, "we have tended to make ourselves available as material to each other … if I was not in constant touch with these people, I could not do those pieces" (Kostelanetz 1986, 103–04).

In Lizzie Thomson's account of Mette Edvardsen's project, *Time has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine* (2010–ongoing), the artist's dependence upon performers such as Thomson, who memorise books to recite to visitors, encapsulates the labour, care and

two-way commitment in the collaborative efforts of much performance-based contemporary work. This is also evidenced in the images of *Here an Echo*, the Biennale project of artist Agatha Gothe-Snape and choreographer-dancer Brooke Stamp, who have long worked together in a deeply attuned collaboration that draws on both the body and text.

Context

Shelley Lasica's gallery-based performances deal with context via dancer agency, and this is one of the themes covered in Erin Brannigan's article, "Context, Discipline and Understanding: The Poetics of Shelley Lasica's Gallery-Based Work." As Lasica says in her own piece included here, "Do you Do This Often?"—"something is still happening and changing between how I might engage people and how they choose to participate; where their attention is." The ability for the performer to adapt to a given context is central to their agency. This agency then begins to command the space and invite particular modes of attention. Agency changes the terms of the context; performance alters the texture of the gallery space. In opposition to this, Victoria Wynne-Jones gives an account of imbedded artistic practice in Auckland in "Wine and Swish: Rebecca Ann Hobbs' Dancevideos in the Mall." Here, local dancers work with a locally-based artist engaging popular dance forms in public spaces. The agency of these self-taught performers indelibly shapes the work of the artist.

Sensation

The dependence of sensation on perception, and the basis of perception on "a unit of *measure*" that, for Emmanuel Kant, "proceeds from the body," reveals the corporeally-based foundation of *sensation* as it is understood and experienced in performance on both sides of the object-subject (or subject-subject) encounter (Deleuze 2002, xvii). It could be that the critique of visuality and ocularcentricity outlined by d'Evie and Thomson in their texts gives way to the plurisensorially charged operations of sensation, which Gilles Deleuze says "acts immediately upon the nervous system" (31). In Marie-Louise Crawley's "*Likely Terpsichore?* Dancing in the Museum of History and Archaeology" the interval and gesture, as theorised by Rebecca Schneider, provide ways to think the role of performance in reanimating and reimagining the life of the museum through the presence and sensations of the performing body.

Instability

Performance is unstable in comparison to an oil painting—there is no arguing with that fact. Jonathan Burrows once described dance as inherently "unstable" (Burrows 2017). Choreographer Doris Humphrey, writing about her innovations in the first decades of the 20th century, recognised the poetics of the release of muscles in the new theatre-dance of the 20th century; the "drama" this presents through a virtuosic dance with instability and risk (Humphrey 1987). It is the dancer's play around the centre of gravity, exploiting an

intensely mobile system of support and release, that expresses, reworks and challenges our most fundamental physical relationship with the world around us.

Intermedial practices in the visual arts have unpicked the solidity of the art object through the deployment of movement, duration, decomposition, mediatisation, assemblage, sound, disappearance and repetition. The stability and endurance of art can no longer be taken for granted. Performance becomes the provocateur for the archival and commodifying tendencies of the museum and gallery. In her text 'Performing Formats: HYPERLANDS," Alice Heyward focuses on three curatorial, theatrical and choreographic events that challenge the notion of stable formats. She proposes the "'performing format' as a multiplicitous subject that performs a work's context, constructing its situation in an expanded choreography of contingency within specific frames of time and space." Lastly, Caroline Wake considers the ambivalent effects of programming one-to-one performance in the context of a biennial. And Amelia Wallin unpacks Alex Roe Martinis' intervention into the artwork as archive, archival labour, and carework as art to destabilise the traditional understandings of the archival impulse in the museum and gallery.

Notes

1. Rebecca Hilton, who performed in this exhibition, also noticed this. She says, "they always said this one thing that really stuck in my craw. They described all of us, the over 100 interpreters (most of whom were dancers), as 'sculptures that go home at night'. Dancers are not sculptures that go home at night" (see Hilton's "DANCERNESS" in this issue).

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