Pictures of an Exhibition

Philip Auslander
I am faced with the peculiar task of writing about two virtual exhibitions. They are virtual only in relation to my position in time and space: one occurred four years ago and is no longer available; the other had not yet opened when I started to write about it. Both were at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, a place I have never visited in a country that is not my own. Even though these exhibitions are recent, my relationship to them is defined by distance, both temporal and spatial, like that of an historian or, better, an archaeologist who seeks to construct a sense of what these events were, what they were about, what it was like to have seen them, by digging into the artifacts they throw off. These artifacts—curatorial and artist’s statements, photographs, videos—they themselves have various relationships to the exhibitions; whereas some are conceptual and preceded the actual events, others are documentary and record what happened. My own seemingly anomalous relationship to these exhibitions may actually be singularly appropriate, given that both focused on the issue of representing things that are intrinsically ephemeral (sound and music on the one hand, dance and bodily movement on the other) in and through solid, immediately present sculptural installations. It is my task to address these absent events and the artworks in them in the permanent medium of words without having experienced them directly.

I have done something like this before. In 2009, I published online an interpretive analysis of The Collectors, Elmgreen & Dragset’s contribution to that year’s Venice Biennale, based solely on photographic and video documentation. As someone who writes frequently on performance, it is hardly unusual for me to analyze work I have experienced only in this way. And while my essay on Elmgreen and Dragset may be indistinguishable from my other discussions of performances, it was for me a self-conscious exercise in exploring the implications of a theoretical position concerning performance documentation (including recorded music) I have been developing since 2005 in a series of interlocking and overlapping writings, of which the present text is the latest installment.

One of my chief goals in this work is to challenge the way the discourse on performance documentation typically obsesses over the ostensibly ontological relationship between the event and its documentation, positing the performance as a cause and the document as its effect which becomes, in turn, something from which to retrieve the original event. Understood in terms of this impossible project, documentation must be judged to be inadequate, for it inevitably provides only a partial and biased record of the event. I have come to see performance documentation differently, however. Whereas the traditional view wants performance documentation to be a medium that passively stores performances to be retrieved later like fossilized insects from amber, I see the document as akin to a performative utterance that brings the event into being as a performance through the act of framing it as such. The performance document is best understood not as a secondary representation of a prior event but as a presentational space—whether that of photography, audio recording, video, or the written word—in which the performance takes place for the beholder. The crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance, but the one between the document and its audience. What is needed, then, is not so much an ontology of the performance document as a phenomenology of the audience’s relationship to it, the process by which the event, whether a performance or an exhibition, discloses itself to us through our engagement with its artifacts.

As audience, our imaginative realization of a performance from its documentation is not primarily a process of retrieving information about something that took place in the past, but the activation of a performance in our present, in which we take part. I disagree,

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4 For a good overview of the discourses and issues surrounding performance documentation, see Matthew Reason, Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2006. As Reason shows, the debates focus on performance’s ephemerality and the question of whether this should be respected as an intrinsic aspect of performance or whether it is more important to preserve performances for the future. For evidence that the debate continues, see Carol Kino, “A Rebel Form Gains Favor. Fights Ensue,” The New York Times, 10 March 2010, available from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/arts/design/14performance.html?pagewanted=1. Accessed 17 March 2010.
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therefore, with Philip Alperson’s admittedly elegant description of a recording of jazz improvisation as “a record of a (unique) action [...] from which we read off, as it were, the original action.” When I listen to recorded music, I hear the actions that produced it not as having occurred at an originary moment in the past to which I am being referred, but as taking place in the present, my present, and addressing me in the here and now. In other words, I experience the event as contemporaneous, regardless of the temporal or physical distance between it and me.

I am using the word “contemporaneous” here not in the sense of “contemporary art” (as in “museum of contemporary art”) or even just to denote immediacy, but in the way the philosoper Hans-Georg Gadamer uses it to describe the aesthetic relationship between a work of art and its perceiver:

‘Contemporaneity’ [...] means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it. It consists in holding on to the thing in such a way that it becomes “contemporaneous” [...] 6

Contemporaneity in this sense is not a characteristic that inheres in certain things; it is, rather, something we bring into being through the relationship we establish with art works, a relationship that does not just happen, but which must be accomplished through a conscious act of engagement. As the phrase “presents itself to us” suggests, Gadamer conceives this relationship as a dialogue. An object or event presents itself to us in such a way as to evoke our response: “Understanding begins [...] when something addresses us” (p. 298).

I see something like the dialogue Gadamer describes in Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová’s video installation Manifesto of Futurist Woman (Let’s Conclude) (2008). It would be easy enough to say that their point of reference, Valerie de Saint-Point’s 1912 Manifesto of Futurist Woman, is an historical artifact reflective of a certain moment and temperament that no longer speaks to current social and cultural situations. But rather than bracketing it off that way, Chişa and Tkáčová allow themselves to be addressed by it and engage with it by finding in it something that speaks to their practice as artists. The video presents majorettes, pretty young women in quasi-military dress, making codified semaphore gestures with flags in a precise unison choreography that combines these gestures with marching movements. One can imagine that this combination of female beauty, mechanized movement, and militarism would have appealed to the Futurists, but this work is not an illustration of Saint-Point’s manifesto. Rather, it is Chişa and Tkáčová’s side of the dialogue with a text that presented itself to them. Instead of representing the text as irretrievably alien to us, they find a way of exploring how it may continue to speak to us without suppressing its alterity.

Discussing performance art recreations in his review of Marina Abramović’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Holland Cotter describes a recent performance of Alan Kaprow’s Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts (1959), as “a dud,” going on to say:

Maybe it couldn’t have been otherwise. The work and the sense of energizing newness it once radiated were, as Kaprow knew, the product of a particular time and culture. The recreated performances in MoMA’s show [of Abramović’s work] are similarly products of a milieu that once made them transgressive, poetic or simply gave them heat, but is now gone. And, through no fault of the performers, the pieces feel like leftover things: flat, dutiful; artifacts.7

It is not my purpose to dispute Cotter’s evaluation; had I seen these re-performances of Eighteen Happenings or Abramovic’s works, I might have felt the same way. But I do want to take issue with the assumption underlying Cotter’s claim, which is that these performances have no meaning outside of their original cultural and historical contexts.

One problem with this position is that it implies historical discontinuity by suggesting since that time is gone and things are different now, we are no longer in a position to find these performances meaningful in the way they once were, which is the only significant way. I follow Gadamer in suggesting that surely there is a profound connection between then and now: who we are now is largely a product of what happened then, which remains part of our current horizon. For example, our present idea of what performance art is is indebted to Kaprow—we would not even be able to think the rubric “performance art” as we understand it, let alone use it critically and historically, without his work. “[W]e are always already affected by history [...] It determines in advance [...] what seems to us worth inquiring about. [T]he other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other” (Gadamer, p. 300).


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According to Edward Said, the idea that is indebted to Kaprow—we would not even be able to think the rubric “performance art” as we understand it, let alone use it critically and historically, without his work. “[W]e are already always affected by history […] It determines in advance […] what seems to us worth inquiring about. [T]he other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other” (Gadamer, p. 300).


There is no unbridgeable chasm between past and present, because the past is always contained in the present. We do not need to recreate the cultural milieu of *Eighteen Happenings* in order to experience it as contemporaneous, because that milieu is already embedded in our own. As Gadamer puts it, “our understanding of work from the past] will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world and, correlative, that the work too belongs to our world” (p. 290). As I noted, this understanding does not simply happen, but results from an intentional engagement with the work designed to make it happen. The understanding of the work that emerges from this engagement will be our understanding of it as a contemporaneous work, not a reiteration of the original audience’s understanding. Seen in this way, understanding proves to be a performance-like event that occurs in the present tense of a specific interaction between a beholder and a text (understood very broadly here, of course). It is a process that yields no final result, no historical “truth” in the usual sense, but is perpetually contingent and incomplete: “the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process” (Gadamer 298).

Looking at the documentation video of Seb Patane’s performance *Absolute Körperkontrolle* (2006), I watch both the performers and the audience. And while the spectators’ presence and reactions are of historical interest, observing them does not get me any closer to an understanding of the work itself. There are aspects of this piece I have difficulty reading: the Lederhosen uniforms worn by the performers signify little to me, which is probably not the case for the museum audience. I connect to the work physically: I can feel in my own body the slow movement of the two men draped over each other, the ways they support one another while shifting their weight, what it would be like to move this way in front of other people for the almost two-hour duration of the piece. Discussing his view of hermeneutics, Gadamer speaks of the “tension […] in the play between the

8 In “The Performativity of Performance Documentation” (see n. 3), I note that the audience is often excluded from 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 ‘interational accomplishment’ to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equal significant contributions” (6).

9 In *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998), Kathy O’Dell argues that performance documentation mobilizes “an unconscious haptic response” in the beholder (14)

[…] text’s strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The *true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between* (p. 295). Although Patane’s work is far less “distanced” from me than the historical texts to which Gadamer refers, its intended relationship to a particular situation is obscure to me, and this strangeness is in tension with a familiarity that derives not only from my corporeal understanding of the work but also from my connection to traditions of choreography and performance in which both Patane and I participate. I do not have to reconstruct the audience’s perception of it to understand it; its meaning for me resides in the play between the aspects I recognize and the ones I don’t.

When discussing works of art, Gadamer does not limit the ability of the object to present itself and address us to originals: the same effect takes place when we are viewing reproductions. For Gadamer, a copy of an artwork simply provides us with access to the original. A copy is “self-effacing” in that it “functions as a means [to apprehend the original] and[…] loses its function when it achieves its end” (pp. 133–134).

This formulation implies that reproduction or documentation is transparent, a suggestion that is probably unacceptable from the perspective of contemporary media theory, which generally suggests that media such as photography and video are not self-effacing and do not exhaust themselves in the act of presenting something to us, but actively shape the things they convey: “the media intervene; they provide us with selective versions of the world rather than direct access to it.” Applying this perspective to performance, Barbara Borčić observes, “Even though a non-edited real time recording is considered an objective document, the usage of technological apparatus is never neutral. The point of view, the angle of shooting, the lighting, the cadre, the frame and the like already determine the recording and put forward an interpretation of the[…] performance.” Arguably, reproduction or documentation presents us only with a filtered view, not access to the original.

Even if this is true, it is not especially troublesome from Gadamer’s perspective, for, as he points out, in historical research “we accept the fact that the subject presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints” (p. 285). The neutrality of the
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apparatus is not at issue because there is never a neutral standpoint from which to perceive anything. Our perception of any subject is always contingent and always open to revision as different aspects of it are disclosed. As far as the question of whether documentation is always already interpretation goes, Gadamer also accepts this as part of the basic epistemological situation. Far from being exceptional and problematic, both the incompleteness of reproduction, mediation, and documentation, and the inevitability of interpretive bias reflect this situation. As we have also seen, Gadamer argues that the object does not achieve “full presence” merely by appearing as an original. We imbue it with presence by grasping it as contemporaneous, whether we access it as an original or in reproduction.

Babette Mangolte thematizes these issues quite explicitly in her photo installations, particularly in the differing versions of *Touching* (2007–2008), in which she invites viewers to sort through and compare many photographs of performances, photographs she feels are “arguably subjective records, translated through the ideas and aesthetics of the photographer [...] to examine the photo details in close up and to create your own composition and collage.”12 In the version of this installation shown at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, the array of photos was accompanied by videos of the performances and “iconic images” from them, thus presenting the viewer with a range of different representations and presentational modes. Each viewer constructs the performances not by attempting to extract the objective “truth” of these events from the record, but experientially through a visual and tactile dialogue with Mangolte’s images that yields knowledge of the performances. The act of understanding the performances is coterminal with the act of sorting and arranging the photographs.

Approaching my task here as an exhibition archaeologist, not an art critic (I seek to understand, not to evaluate) I am in very much the same position as the viewers of Mangolte’s installations as I sit before my computer juggling DVDs, photographs, documents, and websites, seeking to grasp the exhibitions and the works in them and bring them into “full presence.” I am able to experience performances, works of art, or exhibitions from their respective artifacts, whether or not these are self-effacing. I do not claim, of course, that my experience of these events is identical with the experience of someone who attended them physically, only that I am able to experience them in a way that permits me to enter into dialogue with them, that my experience of them is not intrinsically inferior to the experience of someone who “was really there,” and that this dialogue does not depend on my first arriving at an objective reconstruction of the events.13

In Gadamer’s analysis, we do not first understand things, then interpret them: we understand things by interpreting them (p. 306). It is not a matter of extracting an objective account of the event from its record, then using this account as a basis for interpretation. Rather, both the making of the record and the beholder’s use of it are acts of interpretation through which we can understand the event and hold “on to the thing in such a way that it becomes ‘contemporaneous’ [...]”

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