

LEARNING PERFORMANCE

When considering the topic of performance in relation to art school, Vito Acconci's *Learning Piece* (1970) comes to mind. Perhaps it is Acconci's recurring focus on learning as power-infused behaviour modification that makes his performances perennial art school favourites. In *Learning Piece* Acconci sits on stage with a reel to reel audio deck playing Leadbelly's remarkable rendition of "Black Betty" and singing back each musical phrase until he is satisfied with his performance: "Playing, on tape, the first two phrases of Leadbelly's 'Black Betty.' Repeating the two phrases and singing along with them until I judge that I've gotten the feel of Leadbelly's performance, that I'm into him, with him. Going back and adding two phrases at a time until the entire song is learned."¹

Learning Piece confronts the audience with a rather painfully extended attempt at learning by rote. This work demonstrates a conception of learning in which the aim is to "incorporate" an external knowledge object. The task is accomplished satisfactorily when the student is then able to reproduce or perform that knowledge object convincingly. The performance is convincing when it seems, like Acconci's song, to come "from within". In fact, the students' application of their knowledge is often referred to as their scholastic "performance".

Although *Learning Piece* points out that both learning and performance rely on mimetic desire, this image of linear information assimilation is, if not a totally misleading simplification, at least only one dynamic of the learning process. In our contemporary context, learning how to make art is learning how to respond as an artist to situations, materials, ideas, etc. This amorphous object of knowledge manifests as "being" or "becoming" or "responding". However, because we are all being and responding all the time, and being an artist isn't that different from not being one, it's a slippery subject.

Contemporary art often purposely confounds consumption by deflecting interpretation and resisting purposefulness. As a correlative of art making, contemporary art learning is poorly described by metaphors of purchase or simple exchange. Instead of growing incrementally smarter, as one consciously or unconsciously

PERFORMERS IN THE CROWD

turn on tape players, gradually increase volume, spread legs, spread legs further and further apart until both knees touch the knees of the persons sitting next to you. Keep up the pressure until the recording ends.

WORKING IN CONJUNCTION with the Granville Island Market environment, students offer carefully crafted hand-drawn replicas of cash register receipts which usually accompany purchases. This action transforms the peripheral—the receipt as the document of the economic transaction—into an art object. Through this activity the student/artists insert themselves into the market exchange system.

SCHOOL SYSTEMS: The audience is in the school. Using a list, perhaps from a recent art history syllabus, various movements, tendencies and "isms" in art since the beginning of modernism are named. As each name is called, one by one all the water faucets in the school are turned on. The students strip and

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assumes, the learning pattern resembles a scribble rather than a graph. It often occurs that, as the student develops a critical analysis, their original ideas, desires, and aims—which once seemed so simple—are revealed by this analysis to be shot through with unexamined assumptions. An uncomfortable period then ensues when the world seems too dense, coded, and already written. At this point everything becomes terribly complicated and difficult to express.

It's unclear whether a consideration of these codes—the fraught and political nature of his "simple" gesture—was what Acconci was pondering while evaluating his performance of Leadbelly's song. The implications of this skinny white artist on an empty stage, using art to awkwardly emulate "the blues," has some resonance for a more general consideration of learning. The blues is a form synonymous with life experience and remarkable as a vehicle for expressing the African American experience. How does Leadbelly's performance of "Black Betty" become something which appears available to be "learned"? If Acconci could "learn" the blues, is all knowledge equally available? The work may offer some latent comment on the forces of distribution, promotion, and the technology of audio recording; these forces work in concert to turn the song into a discrete entity. Distribution and promotion "repossess" the song and disseminate it, while the tape recorder disembodies the song and thus "liberates" it from the specificity of Leadbelly's individual performance (his name itself emphasizes physicality) and makes it available through a generic system of sound reproduction. Because he is learning a performance, it is impossible for Acconci to "know" if he has "learned" the song until he performs it. This type of knowledge is not a theoretical affair but requires an audience's judgment. In the case of *Learning Piece*, Acconci is the most important member of the audience—it is his own judgment of the performance which he primarily attends to. This performing as learning then also produces a split whereby the learner becomes the audience for their own knowledge/performance.

Even though Acconci's piece may be illustrative of performance as a mode of learning, it doesn't account for the complexities of feedback which students encounter. In art school it is not only, or not primarily, the student who evaluates her/his efforts; the critique or "crit" is a central element of most visual art education. Teachers and students come together to analyze and give "feedback" on the work presented. In most cases the student-artist responds only at the end of the session—this facilitates the reading of the work without the influence of the artist's stated intentions. The crit "tests" the work to see if it supports the reading which the student-artist intends or presumes. The crit is generally an improvised response and how it plays out is influenced not only by the work but by the dynamics of the group

begin to bathe/splash in the water; the audience is invited to join in. A second part of the performance can occur when a second list, perhaps generated in consultation with a learned professor of art history, is read out. (The school public address system, if such a thing exists, could serve to distribute the message.) This list annotates, in reverse chronological order, the historical periods, movements and masters of art before modernism and to the beginnings of art history. With each entry, one by one, the lights in the school are turned off. The audience circulates naturally gravitating to the remaining lit areas, bumping into one another, finally standing in total darkness. The running faucets can still be heard.

THE STUDENT MAKES A LIST of things learned at art school which he/she would like to forget. For instance: that "red can't be separated from what is red". While the student/artist sits in a chair and recites from this list, an assistant vigorously tosses a bucket of ice water on the student in correspondence with each item.

and teacher, recent interests of the individual participants, personal grudges, time constraints, etc. It is purposely not a form in which a final or definitive reading is produced, so the information is contradictory.

Like the kinds of feedback-based group therapies with which the critic shares some dynamics (and historical development), the critique session can be an upsetting experience for the student/artist. Being the focus of attention, having your work analyzed, criticized, and misunderstood while attempting to assimilate these contradictory comments is a trying experience. What is most often remembered (sometimes for a lifetime) are the comments which are perceived to be "negative" in the critique. This learning situation would be reflected by performances less formulaic than Acconci's. The anti-hierarchical performances of the Fluxus artists which attempted to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life might be more appropriate. Their reframed social situations, such as washing a public monument (Ken Friedman), calling attention to an imaginary wound (Yoko Ono), making dinner, or having a concert of chance-generated sounds, stress the seemingly infinite possibilities for making meaning out of mundane, absurd, group interactions and reframe the activities of specialized art education as elements of the ongoing performance of social life. The taboo-breaking experimentation and anti-social behaviour found in the more extreme, violent, cathartic, messy and psychological works of the Viennese Actionists (active throughout the 1960s) or more recent performance works of anger and pathos such as those of American artist Paul McCarthy also offer possible responses to the assumptions and anxieties which underlie the school community. The materials list for McCarthy's 1996-97 *Santa Chocolate Shop* performance/installation documents an amassing of trashy expendable props which act as triggers for the performer's libidinal desires and repulsions. The list reads: "plywood structure, two laser disc players, three 3-tube video projectors, two speakers, two amplifiers, tin containers of Hershey's Chocolate Flavor Syrup, plastic candy canes, Christmas tree decorations, belt with handle, decorative bows, dolls, stuffed animal, plastic duck, plastic ears, green hat, propane stove, kitchen utensils, large metal pan with lid, plastic bottle, table, armchair, carpet, Plexiglas, Kino Flo fluorescent light, paper, fabric, adhesive tape and electric cables."² The works of the Actionists and McCarthy confront the knowledge object as something liminal and fake: bodily products which are smearable and only marginally assimilable—food that turns into shit, shit that turns into food, mass produced syrups, sauces, and paints that do double duty as shit and blood. Challenging the institution's avowed support for "free expression" by having video projectors, propane, and chocolate syrup in close proximity is an art student

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Instead of alone on a stage,
instead of a stage, instead of
being a vessel, instead of being
an artist, instead of being a man,
instead of being distinct from a
chair and a table, instead of
wanting to be the center of
attention, instead of coming
together under the gaze of oth-
ers, instead of being present,
instead of being live, instead of
being in opposition to a machine,
instead of hearing a voice and
wanting to have it come out your
mouth, instead of wanting all
that, instead of a tape recorder,
instead of pushing play and
rewind, instead of listening to
your own voice as produced by
the specific acoustics of the hall,
instead of the room as a
metaphor for the mind, instead of
the audience as an ersatz
community, instead of 8pm,
instead of singing about a
woman, instead of the blues,
instead of 1970, instead of the
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,
Connecticut, instead of one hour,
instead of black socks, etc.

revenge-fantasy. Although it may be excessive, this seemingly regressive behaviour which vocally, physically, and scatologically tests the limits of learning and performance rather naturally arises in relation to questions of epistemology.

Performance art seeks not just to create more accurate metaphors but to recognize learning in the act. This requires an attentiveness to the indivisible co-creation of learning and performance. This is not a solipsistic pursuit but requires sensitivity to the historical, physical, and, increasingly, the technological complexities of the moment itself. How do we pay meaningful attention as one idea gestures toward another within a situation? This has less to do with performance art as a genre and more to do with performance as a subject meeting place and time. However, the acceleration of cultural change alters the dollar value of learning. The impetus to transform learning into productivity is a goal of creators of artificial intelligence and a marketing economy which sells "potential" as well as of post-structuralist thinkers with emancipatory intentions.

"Half-baked ideas" may be less prejudicially described as "emergent discourses". If any genre has been characterized as being half-baked, flaky, adolescent and undeveloped, it is performance art. If there is a place which claims to support emergent discourses it is the art school. This points to another potential overlap between art school learning and performance art. Students should not worry too much about making "good" work. The more they try to emulate works validated by their instructors, the more they run the risk of becoming overly cautious and conservative. When I recently saw a performance by a group of students from a workshop with American avant-garde choreographer/filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, I was struck not just by the interesting nature of the performance but by how appropriate the venue seemed. I realized that the art school environment mid-afternoon, mid-week was a great venue for performance. The lack of expectations which I brought to the event left me able to attend to the particularities and subtleties of the performance most acutely and pleasurably. In my experience of art school performance, the works which often are the most profound require just exactly the type of audience the class provides: small, intimate, participatory, critical and generous. The works themselves are usually very uneven, and one finds only moments or flashes of interesting action. In critiquing these works the class often queries whether this specificity to the school situation forms a limitation of the performance. Still, if there is some potential in chasing a point of fission between learning and performance, then an art school setting should be a place particularly conducive to the ugly, ridiculous, meaningless, poignant, pathetic, filthy, irritating, embarrassing instances of emergent discourses.

1 *The Art of Performance, A Critical Anthology*, Ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (New York: Dutton, 1984), p 196.

2 *Artforum*, Nov. 2000.

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