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## **Lampenfieber: Die Theatralität der Performance**

Stage Fright: The Theatricality of Performance

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## Introduction

This essay was conceptualized in the late nineties and written in 2000 to try to come to terms with the realization that my longstanding interest in performance art and actions had been conceptually staged against received ideas of theatre. Simultaneously, however, some vague notion of theatricality, having more to do with artifice and space than actual dramatic texts and theatrical performances was beginning to appeal. It seems to me now that what was emergent was a kind of vexed expressionism critically aware of its lineage which includes the depthless hysterics of Warholian acting, the deskilling of conceptualism, and existing under the obsessive scrutiny and neglect of spectacular media surveillance.

Since writing this essay two tendencies have emerged in contemporary work which continue to expand visual artists' relation to the broad notion of the theatrical outlined here. One tendency is a fascination with actors and acting. These works often seem to focus on rehearsal, repetition and an ambiguity concerning what constitutes the performance. (This is the case in my own work and in works by many others, for instance Rashid Masharawi's 2002 video *Waiting*, which comments on experience in Palestine and Israel by video taping actors responding to a casting call who are told that their assignment is to wait.) Artists increasingly recognize the actor as an available agent, a kind of cultural mercenary who can be hired and "sent in". (Not unlike Saddam's doubles.) In capitalist-dream-factory culture little children lie in bed and fantasize that they are movie actors. We imagine ourselves "acting" yet we are never sure what the act itself should be. As the fantasy is taken up by more and more individuals the "talent pool" grows. You might not be able to cast a "star" but you can hire a star-surrogate. One of the uncanny effects of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley's remake of Vito Acconci's work in *Fresh Acconci* (1995) is that the performers appear to be cast from Hollywood's still-waiting-to-be-discovered. We see buff, aspiring actors, almost pornographically available and willing, reenact Acconci's unsettling actions in the nude in an unfurnished California mansion. The original hunger-anger of

Acconci's subversions and audience manipulations is doubled by the palpable desire of the actors to "make it". So, the actor has come to function as a kind of new media in visual art, a complex signifier which links to expression, artifice and economic relations.

The second "theatrical" tendency which has gained ascendancy is artists' reemerging interest in built environments, architecture and social space. Evidence of this trend can be found in the movement from performance to built space by artists such as Acconci and Burden as well as recent books such as *Warped Space* by Anthony Vidler which examines the spatial practices of artists Rachel Whiteread, Mike Kelley, Martha Rosler and Vito Acconci in an architectural context. Similarly the upcoming thematic residency at the Banff Center, Canada whose program themes tend to reflect/anticipate art world trends is "Informal Architecture". Although cinema – in part through the increasing use of three dimensional modeling which allows the planners to move through digitally constructed imaginary spaces – is increasingly a reference point for contemporary architecture, it seems to me that there is something fundamentally *theatrical* about built space. One obvious difference between cinema and theatre is that theatre and the subjects of theatre (audience and actors) are tied to a contiguous, real-world space. Just like you and me. In cinema and dreams we jump from one place-time to another, but in waking life, we are, from birth to death, simply within one space which we enter, only to exit into another contiguous space. This is why entrances and exits both in life and theatre, are dramatic, narrative altering events. One of the most charming aspects of theatre is that it explores our condition of relentless visibility by using all sorts of mechanisms to bring players on and off of the stage and in and out of view. This delineation of playing space against backstage is a fascination of mine. I'm exiting through the wings, and now, you can't see me, so, I'm gone! Surely this relates back to some childhood game of hiding and revealing. And it seems our social-commercial spaces are similarly designed around back stage, stage and audience areas which suggest rules of interaction. For instance the ubiquitous (in North America at least) franchise coffee bars involve delineations typical of

many commercial spaces. Customers find these reassuringly clear: there is a hidden backroom for storage and preparation, the employees enter and exit the stage through a door which leads to this backstage. There is a staging area behind a fourth wall/serving counter which often even incorporates a raised floor and here the employees prepare the coffee and banter with each other and the customers. The audience area is for the customers who play their role on the other side of the counter.

One public space where these delineations are not clear is the contemporary gallery-museum space. The backstage where exhibitions are prepared and organized, where the art works (props/sets) are stored is obvious. But what clearly separates the audience (space) from the performance (space) in the gallery? Nothing! As Michael Fried criticizes in his 1967 *Art and Objecthood* essay, often, with contemporary art, the audience finds themselves suddenly, and perhaps uncomfortably, onstage with the art. Media installations which answer this discomfort with a traditional cinematic spatial delineation (audience sitting in the dark, performance on the screen) are an important factor in what I perceive as audiences' increased comfort with video projection over other art forms. However, the reorganization of the museum to conform to a cinema multi-plex hardly reflects the possibilities for new spatial exploration which museums can provide. Now that fears of the museum's compromised viability and impending death, agonized over from the seventies to the nineties, seem to have been answered temporarily by a renewal – at first through site specific and public art but more recently through the reinvigoration of museum space by media art and new architecture – we can ask, just what kind of theatre is the contemporary art museum?

### Making an Entrance

The *theatrical* is a mode or tendency which can occur in the absence of any traditional notion of theatre. However, the connotations of the term have shifted significantly over the past thirty years.<sup>1</sup> In his 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood* (published in *Artforum* magazine) Michael Fried used the term "theatrical" to

vehemently critique minimal art and emerging interdisciplinary forms. Ten years later, Michel Benamou championed performativity (what Fried had called theatricality) as the dominant quality of the postmodern.<sup>2</sup> Similar arguments were put forward by Douglas Crimp, in 1984<sup>3</sup>, and Henry Sayre, in 1989<sup>4</sup>. In the mid to late-nineties the performative is established as an important concept for theorists such as Judith Butler, Peggy Phelan, Amelia Jones, who credit the performative with an agency lacking in more static formulations of subjectivity, gender, and race.

The term theatrical continues to be used as an ambiguous synonym for performance. As the theatrical is alternately damned and lauded, this shifting use becomes confusing. This essay considers notions of theatricality in relation to visual art and performance art. I begin by considering concepts of performance and theatricality, particularly Fried's problematic but formative essay and then proceed to suggest a number of other tendencies which fall under theatricality's contested rubric. Finally, I consider how theatricality produces both expression and a simultaneous critical suspicion with regard to the viability of such expressiveness.

The practice and reception of performance conspicuously defies definitions. In his thorough overview of performance practice and theory, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson refers to performance as a "contested concept"<sup>5</sup>. He states, "Performance by its nature resists conclusion, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries and limits so useful to traditional academic writing and academic structures" (Carlson, 189). The ways in which performance enacts this resistance are responsible for its ubiquity as a postmodern model: "There are several reasons for the great popularity of 'performance' as a metaphor or analytical tool for current practitioners of so wide a range of cultural studies. One is the major shift in many cultural fields from the 'what' of culture to the 'how', from the accumulation of social, cultural, psychological, political or linguistic data to a consideration of how this material is created, valorized, and changed, to how it lives and operates within the culture, by its actions. Its real meaning is now

sought in its praxis, its performance." (Carlson, 195) This theorizing of action and enacting of theory with bodies in time and place produces meanings which are radically contingent on the audience, the situation, the method of retelling and therefore refute authorship from a single, unified, masterful position. In this way performance (and recognition of the performative) parallels projects of poststructuralism and postmodernism which question the stabilities of author and text, subject and object, performer and audience.

Even though Carlson's book provides a lengthy elaboration of the many ways in which visual art, theatre, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, and postmodern practices employ and influence notions of performance, he ultimately posits that there remains a useful distinction between what he calls "cultural" performance and "theatrical" performance. Cultural performance can encompass "almost any cultural or social activity" (Carlson, 198). Examples range from political rallies, sporting events and religious rites, to subtle performative activities such as writing, personal quotidian ritual and the enacting of identity. While the "cultural" and "theatrical" modes of performance are not mutually exclusive, the main distinction for Carlson is that in "theatrical" performance, an important, ultimately *political* sense of occasion is recognized by both spectators and performers alike. This defines "the particular quality and power of 'theatrical' performance [...] such performance is experienced by an individual who is also part of a group, so that social relations are built into the experience itself" (Carlson, 199). These social relations are augmented by an implicit agreement that both performer and audience are carrying on an interpretive engagement with the activity. Combined with the physicality of performance, Carlson finds these mutually agreed engagements (in contrast, for instance, to the de-emphasis of shared critical or interpretive reception of a football game or television program) to be a defining factor of "theatrical performance" as a site for "the endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflection and experimentation". Thus, he doesn't want to abandon the category of "theatrical" performance or collapse it into cultural performance in general.

This distinction between cultural and theatrical performance is useful while, simultaneously, precarious. Although I agree with an emphasis on performance's engagement of the social – through the audience's shared act of reception and interpretation – adequately contextualized a "cultural" performance such as a rave or fashion show might provoke self-reflection and experimentation as much as a traditional "theatrical" presentation. The need for definitions of performance stems from our uncertainties concerning how to differentiate our participation in the media-scape of cultural and commercial performances, which we inhabit. Artists tend to use "theatrical" performance to critically respond to, reenact, or reject these ubiquitous "cultural" performances. However, that the term "theatrical" should signify the traces of a critical consciousness when Broadway spectacles such as *Cats*, *Showboat* or *Rent* are the dominant examples seems, perhaps, farfetched. Rather, what should be stressed are the possibilities for the audience and performers to acknowledge their shared act of reception and interpretation, which has the potential to turn any performance into a "theatrical" or critically engaged experience.

Already in this text I have found myself needing to employ such terms as: "mass media performance" or "commercial performance". But is a performance still a performance once it has been recorded, edited, reproduced? Peggy Phelan has argued that performance is a fundamentally unreplicable form. "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations; once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance."<sup>6</sup> Phelan's evocation of performance's commitment to the present tense provides a compelling definition of performance as radically contingent, objectless, traceless, and in opposition to mass reproduction. As dominant films and television shows carefully sublate the sense of an original performance

to the final product, one can plausibly argue that they are not performance. Yet, to say that a TV actor's performance is not a performance seems to confuse the circularity – troubling though it may be – by which our performance of self is informed by the mass media. Having internalized the camera's sense of duration and repeatability, our performative gesture/enunciation/reception can not be separated from its potential for, and traces of, reproduction. The experience of watching a live performance is not unmediated – the audience's very sense of how long the performance is "taking" is largely predicated on mass media's norms of duration. A definition of performance which opposes reproduction also makes it difficult to situate the work of a contemporary generation of artists who are less concerned with this ontological irreproducibility of performance and tend to freely combine the live and prerecorded risking/reconciling participation in an economy of real-time disappearance and an economy of mediated reproduction.

The broadest notions of performance extend the possibility of performance to inanimate as well as animate performers. Here the emphasis shifts from the performance as a thing in its own right to the performative as a relationship through which existence (although explicitly not essence) is enacted. This definition of performance – in which a sculpture or photograph may be considered performative – finds an art historical precedence in Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood*. In fact, this essay has become a troubled parent-text to which performance theorists are compelled to return.<sup>7</sup> Fried rebukes minimal art (which he calls "literalist" to contrast it with the abstract work he champions) as "too theatrical". Fried's "theatricality" doesn't denote a performed text or action but a relationship between the audience and the work of art – be it a live or inanimate work. "Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art "what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]" the experience of literalist art is of an "object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder"<sup>8</sup> (original emphasis; Fried, citing sculptor Robert Morris). It is

through Fried's essay that "theatricality" entered the visual arts lexicon in a pejorative manner.

A semantic confusion has been engendered by the fact that the characteristics of Fried's "theatricality" have come to be identified as synonymous with the postmodern and performative. Fried himself acknowledges this shift. "In thirty-year retrospect, it has become clear that Fried's 'theatricality' is what we now call 'post-modernism'." Many writers who respond to Fried's term (for instance, Amelia Jones, in her book, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*) recognize that the artistic tendencies which offended Fried's modernist sensibility are, by and large, the same tendencies postmodern artists have championed. Theatricality, then, is inverted from negative to positive without the specifics of the term (which Fried used as a cipher to designate *everything* he didn't like about the new art) being questioned. If, however, we accept that Fried's theatricality has become postmodernism, and allow that although performance may be the exemplary mode of the postmodern, every performance isn't theatrical, it makes sense to ask again, What is theatricality? Or perhaps: What good is theatricality if it exists?

When speaking of Fried's theatricality it is necessary to offer the caveat that even though his passionate rhetoric makes it easy for those invested in performance and theatre to reject his argument outright, he didn't mean theatre *literally*. The "theatre" in statements such as: "Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre." (Fried, 141) or "the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art." (Fried, 125) is a relationship between the spectator and the object, which parallels that of a traditional theatrical presentation; a staged quality to the installation of the work, by which the whole viewing situation, becomes a *mise-en-scène* which *is* the work. Fried stated that theatre itself (his examples are Brecht and Artaud) had recognized it's need to defeat the theatrical.

While Fried's critique of theatricality has been thoroughly refuted by subsequent art and theory, what

remains important here are the terms which he established and which most of his critics have retained for describing the theatrical and the performative. In *From Acting to Performance* Philip Auslander gives a nuanced account of how Fried's argument against theatricality ironically set the terms for an emergent postmodernism bent on rejecting such dualisms. "Critical discourses on postmodernism in both the visual arts and performance staked out positions on the discursive field of Greenbergian modernism defined by Fried, and found themselves unintentionally perpetuating Greenberg's legacy of formalist criticism even while speaking for artistic practices that have no place in the Greenbergian scheme [...]. The final irony of this chapter in the history of criticism may be that, in trying to stave off the encroachment of postmodernism and theatricality in the visual arts, Fried established a discourse that made it possible to theorize postmodern performance, a phenomenon that is virtually the antithesis of the hermetic modernist abstraction Fried sought to protect."<sup>10</sup>

### Fried's Theatricality: Situation, Presence, Duration, Objecthood

The idea that an art work can't be separated from its context or reception is such a foundational tenant of postmodernism that it might be hard for some to understand Fried's position in this regard. For Fried this dependence of the work on the beholder is a central condition of theatricality and signals a troubling lack of autonomy within the work. With the minimal works Fried is addressing, and increasingly in postmodern art in general, the context *becomes* the work. Fried describes minimalist sculptures as having a kind of presence which results from their staging/installation in the gallery and contributes to an overall theatrical effect. This presence extends from and results in an anthropomorphism; he feels that the works co-exist with the viewer in the relational manner of sentient beings. (Fried also locates this anthropomorphism in a tendency towards hollow forms.) The work's palpable presence "confronts" the viewer and heightens a sense of being in a "situation". The way the art situates the viewer in relation to itself, as if in a scene, makes the viewer self-conscious in a manner

which is not uncommon in contemporary art, but goes against the notion of a disembodied, idealized, modernist viewer. This confrontation between artwork and viewer instigates a relationship with "the entire situation" (Fried, 127), and this means "all of it – including, it seems, the beholder's *body*." (Fried, 127)

Fried disparages the effective, but facile presence of the works as a "stage presence" (Fried, 127). This stage presence is a kind of cheap trick in comparison with the moment to moment "presentness" which Fried finds "secreted" (Fried, 146) from proper modernist works. Modernist presentness fosters an experience which in making itself new with each instant, eschews taking into account the viewer's reception in and through time. However, this duration of experience is precisely what theatrical presence contributes to, thus establishing another distinguishing characteristic of theatrical sensibility: a fascination with duration. "The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of experience* – is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective" (Fried, 145).<sup>11</sup>

Fried also poses the ultimate question of the work's "objecthood," and objecthood and theatre, for Fried are synonymous. An object, is a thing in the world like any other; it doesn't elevate itself (by transcendent modernist means) above it's material here and now. Thus it isn't a proper modernist artwork but merely a thing in the world, one which only serves to remind the viewer of his own embodiment, materiality, instrumentality, and lack of higher purpose. This everyday quality of objecthood, manifested in the rather somber minimalist forms, would seem to be the opposite of theatricality's vernacular connotations, which suggest something arch, showy, and inauthentic. But it is the object's consignment to the here-and-now that enacts a performative (Fried's *theatrical*) model. Resolutely unlike nature, these sculptures are social: they are

constructed *for* the viewer; they don't assert an autonomy from the specific situation. Therefore the work's "authenticity" as an *object* (its objecthood) is the seat of it's "inauthenticity" or lack of commitment as a work of modernist art.

The relationship between everyday life and theatre was also pursued (without pejorative distrust of the material world) by social scientists, such as Irving Goffman, who were studying human behaviour in the late 50's and 60's. Umberto Eco references Goffman when he succinctly states: "It is not theatre that is able to imitate life; it is social life that is designed as a continuous performance and, because of this, there is a link between theatre and life."<sup>12</sup> This reversal of artificiality and authenticity – in fact, the growing disdain for such binaries – was what Fried located in the minimalists' use of industrial materials, serial repetition, machine process, object qualities.

The "theatrical" qualities which contributed to the work's "objecthood" distress Fried not only in and of themselves but because he assumes that the work of art models or prescribes the way the viewer is to exist in the world. Sensitized by his anxieties, Fried's attunement to the phenomenological, physical relation between ourselves and an object /performer seems more vivid and significant than many latter day theorists who champion performativity. "(S)omeone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to *become* that beholder, that audience of one – and inasmuch as literalist work *depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone, which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him. (Such isolation is not solitude any more than such confrontation is communication.)" (Fried, 140)

I envy Fried's anthropomorphic projections; I'm still waiting to feel this much from a steel cube. In Fried's description, the sculpture is like a hustler trying to solicit the viewer. His experience is bound-up with a sense of individuality and masculinity which, if it is to be masterful, must be singular and is therefore threatened by the presence of another. Even an inert wood

or steel form provokes a crisis to the centrality of the viewer. This doesn't happen for Fried with a proper modernist object, a painting by Noland or Olitski, for instance, because it is just like him; it doesn't confront him, it models an ideal sense of himself – autonomous, slightly removed, extraordinary but not showy, meaningful but not obvious, deep but not durational (i.e. mortal). Fried's reaction admits an anxious relationship between recognition and resemblance (the childish saying is "it takes one to know one") which gets obscured in many postmodern "readings" of both art objects and performance.

The notion of performance which I find productively provocative expands Fried's (obliquely rendered) analysis of the performative and also asks questions about gender, the body and subjectivity. I would say performance concerns something – an object, text or action, – which can't be definitively separated from its reception. There is nothing unique in this definition; it corresponds to the almost canonical concerns of postmodern and poststructural theories which deconstruct the dualities of subject and object, self and other. This unsettling of fixed positions and meanings is understood as empowering to the observer/reader, who now intervenes in the production of meaning through his or her interactions. This non-autonomy of performance (its reliance on the audience) caused postmodernists to herald its provocations as a welcome limit on master narratives and the presumed autonomy and authority of the work of art. Donna Haraway elaborates a postmodern account of the object of inquiry (scientific or otherwise) in her essay on objectivity entitled *Situated Knowledges*. "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency of 'objective' knowledge."<sup>13</sup> Haraway's statement is comparable to Fried's claim that "inasmuch as literalist work *depends* on the beholder, is *incomplete* without him" (Fried, 140). Both of these statements characterize the objects in question as active agents. For Haraway, this liberates "previously passive categories of objects of knowledge."<sup>14</sup> For Fried the liberation of the object signals that it is deficient and

troublingly dependent on the viewer. He describes an object so contingent as to be alternately cloying and threatening. It would seem that the ideal modernist spectator – perhaps enjoying the privilege of being white, middle class and male – doesn't need to be needed by the art. He has no desire to become an actor in the scene. To the contrary, Fried's descriptions are tinged with a longing to *submit* to the work of art with a passive abandon which the reflexivity of the postmodern viewing situation discourages.

In following Fried's prescription in a contrary manner – that is, staging itself against theatre while celebrating the performative<sup>15</sup> – performance art in the 60's and 70's (is often read as asserting) asserted a kind of authenticity of the body against the pretense and disguise of character, narrative, costume, usually associated with the theatre. Whether these experiments – by practitioners as varied as Vito Acconci, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim – represent a modernist investment in "origin" and "presence" (here located in the human body), or were staging the impossibility of this presence, is arguable.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of this ambivalence, a language of performance art developed out of these early works that purposely drove a wedge between performance art and theatricality. While the next generation of performance artists gradually reincorporated spoken text, costume, music, character and more recently video, these elements often reentered in an untheorized manner. While performance and performativity have been understood as central to postmodern art, the relationship between theatricality and performance art has yet to be figured even though many artists<sup>17</sup> continue to explore its range.

### The Ambivalent Theatrical

Is theatricality simply a synonym for the performativity of postmodern culture or can the term provide a more specific reference? For me, although theatricality remains salted with Fried's venom I feel no need to rescue it. In fact it suits my purpose to use a term which connotes both enthusiasm and loathing. The theatrical itself induces such an oscillation. My sense

of this "ambivalent" theatrical accretes from Fried as well as from a variety of vernacular and theoretical uses of the term.

In general parlance, theatre is theatrical when it quotes itself, when it foregrounds or exaggerates its own characteristics – when it stages its staginess. However, the instances of the theatrical which interest me pose a larger gap than this self-referentiality, perhaps because they occur outside the theatre proper and so defy the definition of theatricality as theater's self-consciousness. Art critic Henry Sayre whose book, *The Object of Performance*, offered an assessment of the American seventies' avant-garde in relation to performance, states that "theatricality may be considered that propensity in the visual arts for a work to reveal itself within the mind of the beholder as something other than what it is known empirically to be". Following his description, and not limiting it to the visual arts, I would say that theatricality generates a *compelling experience of something which isn't convincing*. And it is this possibility for manifesting meaningful experience, while eschewing truth claims, which is theatricality's potential. This seems to correspond to how Roland Barthes describes the function of the "third meaning" in his 1970 essay by that name.

"I realized then that the 'scandal', the supplement or deviation imposed upon this classical representation of grief, derived quite explicitly from a tenuous relation: that of the low kerchief, the closed eyes, and the convex mouth [...] from a relation between the 'lowness' of the kerchief, worn abnormally close to the eyebrows as in those disguises which seek to create a foolish and stupid expression, the circumflex accent formed by the old, faded eyebrows, the excessive curve of the lowered eyelids, close-set but apparently squinting, and the bar of the half open mouth corresponding to the curve of the kerchief and to that of the brows, metaphorically speaking 'like a fish out of water'. All these features (the absurdly low kerchief, the old woman, the squinting eyelids, the fish) have as a vague reference a somewhat low language, the language of a rather pathetic disguise. United with the noble grief of the obvious meaning, they form a dialogism so tenuous that there is no guarantee of its

intentionality. The characteristic of this third meaning – at least in Eisenstein – actually blurs the limit separating expression from disguise, but also presents this oscillation quite succinctly: an elliptical emphasis, so to speak, a complex, very intricate arrangement (for it implies a temporality of signification)."<sup>18</sup>

It is this compelling experience of something which isn't convincing which Barthes describes as the "third meaning". The third meaning is a kind of excess, an "obtuse" meaning which complicates but doesn't invalidate the more direct "obvious" meaning. "The obtuse meaning, then, has something to do with disguise [...] An actor disguises himself twice over (once as actor in the anecdote, once as actor in the dramaturgy), without the one disguise destroying the other; a layering of meanings which always allows the previous one to subsist, as in a geological formation; to speak the contrary without renouncing the thing contradicted."<sup>19</sup> Barthes locates this "non negating *mockery of expression*"<sup>20</sup> in a series of stills from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Barthes' description of this obtuse meaning is evocative of a contemporary aesthetic which I am calling the "ambivalent" theatrical. This theatricality employs what Barthes describes as "the language of a rather pathetic disguise". A tension between the sincerity of intention of the obvious meaning and the deviation imposed by the excess of the expression is necessary to hold the third meaning in this ambivalent position, to stop it from slipping entirely into irony or camp. This ambivalent theatrical confounds simple readings of the performance as action, or presence, or authenticity, or expression and introduces a struggle with signification into the work. As the ambivalent theatrical is a mode of the performative, it shares a relationship to some of performance's structuring conditions such as situation, presence, duration and objecthood, which have already been discussed. Further discussion of this ambivalent theatrical will touch on questions of the body, critical distance, materiality, death, and space. These qualities form a nascent description of the conditions of theatricality and a particular relation whereby the ambivalent theatrical distances the performance from itself.

## Feel Yourself Falling

The oscillation of the obtuse and obvious meaning which Barthes describes implies a temporality of signification which brings to mind Fried's statement that: "The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of experience* – is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective" (Fried, 145).

This sense of temporality is also the time of proprioception, the body's complex experience of itself. Proprioception is carried out by "the sensory nerves with specialized receptors to record muscle stretch, pull on tendons, joint compression and the position of your head in relation to gravity".<sup>21</sup> This information is processed by the "somatosensory cortex of the cerebrum [...] The cerebellum, in particular, is responsible for constant coordination and correction of posture, movement and muscle tone. Even more fascinating, it holds the image of where you just were, where you are now, *and* it projects where you will go next. Remember the sensation of reaching for a stair with your foot when there was none? Your brain projection was different from actuality". (Ibid) A fear of being tripped up, or exposed by/as our bodies in this proprioceptive time fits Fried's anxious description. It is evidence of the persistence of a mind/body duality whereby the perfection (presentness) of the "immaterial" mind is pitted against the process (duration) of the material body. Proprioceptive responses remind us that it is not a mind which animates the body as an object or vessel, but a body consciousness by which we experience the world.

## Stand Back

Modernist sensibility objects to the enveloping nature of the constitutive reciprocity of subject and object in the performative interaction. In Fried's Greenbergian formulation of judgment (concerning what is *authentic*

and *compelling* in art) a distance necessary for objectivity is essential. Postmodern performance's privileging of intersubjectivity contests essentialism and deconstructs persistent Cartesian oppositions between subject and object – it purposely makes untenable the notion of distance as objectivity. Yet this distance/objectivity itself should not be solely equated with a retrograde modernist formalism. Donna Haraway, writing from the perspective of postmodern science, theorizes about a feminist objectivity which is conditional, a "situated knowledge" always contextualized by admitting its perspective or location. Performance theorist Jon Erickson refutes the dualities of subject/object and describes objectification as a movement or process "which is never fully completed. It is in fact an aspect of ongoing consciousness that it needs to objectify things in order to recognize them in the first place; this is a function of memory. The project of objectification is necessarily an incomplete one. An 'art object', a 'literary object', even a 'theoretical object' is not something static; rather, it is something that is always being objectified as long as attention is paid to it [...] The big question in art or in an artful life is whether to allow others to objectify you or to try and take control of your own objectification [...] This is a performance problem, a kind of self-objectification as self-fashioning".<sup>22</sup>

The contingencies of performer and spectator need not collapse distance, but as Erickson suggests, one's performance may initiate the movement necessary to put distance between subject and object without ossifying either position.<sup>23</sup>

Ambivalent theatricality opens up a gap which posits no "outside" but makes strange from inside the expression. The ambivalent theatrical works against the totalizing effects of interactivity to inject something that must be read (something which is signifying) into the immersive experience. More obtuse than a Brechtian distanciation device, it similarly brings the spectator out of a exclusive relationship to the object/performance. The theatrical works against the presence of performance but rather than negating the performative it requires a performance environment to operate within.

### Body, slide projector, piles of rotting...

In its manifestation through disguise, makeup, false accents – an ambivalent excess of signification – this third meaning is manifest through materiality. Objecthood is such a materiality, that is, the stuff of the world – makeup or steel I beams – not transformed by a higher purpose or meaning. Materiality offers a resistance to being totally consumed as meaning, to being readable. Thus the theatrical is something which suggests it is available to be read but resists such a reading by its ambivalence, its *thickness*. This type of resistance links the material back to the body, which (from our human perspective) never totally integrates with other matter, never becomes one object in a field of objects, never fully dematerializes to become a sign. Erickson describes the dilemma of the body, in relation to both modernist presence and postmodernist dematerialization: "So the problem of the body in performance remains twofold; when the intention is to present the body itself as flesh, as corporeality, as living organism itself free of signs, it remains a sign none the less – at the very least the sign of 'the body', 'mortality', 'sensuality'. It is not *enough* of a pure corpus. When the intention is to present the performer's body as a primarily a sign, idea, or representation, corporeality always intervenes, and it is *too much* of a body."<sup>24</sup>

The crosstalk between plays of materiality as presence and sign as absence, are heightened by theatricality, which weighs in as both material and sign. This materiality doesn't manifest a soul-like presence, but the problematic material, finite, durational presence of the body. Early performance and body art not only questioned the art object as commodity but made use of the uneasy presence of spectators in the gallery space (which, as opposed to the darkness of the theatre, heightens the viewer's physical awareness) to stage the problematics of the object qualities of the body. To use the body as material is to question the inert, stable, objective, qualities of other inanimate materials by association.

### A Woman's Hands or the Hands of a Woman

Radical drag often seeks to add a layer of feminine characteristics without obscuring masculine ones – for instance, the practice of keeping one's mustache while all other features are feminized would be the kind of disguise described by the third meaning. Yet *femininity* under patriarchy hasn't easily produced the layered, resistant meaning which Barthes describes. Although patriarchal discourses have traditionally denigrated bodily experience and its instabilities as feminine, so too have they placed the "inauthenticities" of theatricality on the side of the feminine. The female/body has been persistently constructed as excessive, mysterious, explicitly material – in fact, "unreadable". Why hasn't this obscurity been figured as a complication or third meaning which undermines an homogeneous reading of the feminine? Woman's "obscurity" has been conflated with her "obvious" meaning. Her feminine "unreadability" ossifies instead of oscillates.<sup>25</sup> Much recent performance work by women questions what kind of "disguise" or accent would interfere with the predominance of woman's "obvious" reading as female. It is a difficult act – to remain "obtuse" the ambivalent theatrical must retain enough of its obvious, literal, or traditional meaning so as not to overwhelm its ambiguity. For a female performer, this means not slipping completely out of the feminine, but playing it against itself, or even playing parts of the body against the whole. It also seems evident that the reading of "theatricality" or the "third meaning" is cultural. Not everyone is able or willing to find the ambivalence in the sign.

### Staged Space

The theatrical is concerned with space, movement and distance. It literally "takes place". The theatrical subject is organized around entrances and exits. Entrances and exits drive the narrative or create a basic narrative of their own. The cinematic and the digital subject (let's imagine for the sake of brevity that we know what such things are) can both be reorganized in time – it doesn't even make sense to speak of their "fragmentation", for existing as a collection of fragments is their natural state. The theatrical subject,

however, can only "cut" into space, by entering and exiting. Bound by physical limits, the theatrical subject can exit the stage, but it can't really disappear, while alive it is never really "absent". (Thus the necessity of a presence that makes the audience feel a palpable absence when the performer leaves the stage).<sup>26</sup> Death haunts the performing body, its mortality is always subtly on display. However performing death presents logistical problems, the body lying center stage, has the effect of stopping the narrative.

While Fried may have critiqued minimalist objects for their staged presence, he recognized that this presence was contingent on an absence, a sense of emptiness which the viewer feels compelled to fill. At least one minimalist sculpture which inspired Fried's criticism; Tony Smith's six foot square black steel cube *Die* (1962), bears comparison with a body shot dead, but not yet dragged off stage. It continues to perform a death scene, to persistently remind the viewer of its lifelessness. Every mortal body may carry a whiff of death's "absence presence", but only the final exit will manifest the "present absence", and this requires leaving, not the room, but the body itself.<sup>27</sup> Lifelessness, marked by an absence of spirit, confirms in absentia the mysterious something more of the animate being. How to theorize this gap between real death and a theatrical death? These theatrical "remains" are unstable, they risk slipping into real lifelessness, thereby becoming an "object" or alternately they may blink and breathe, and become undead. On stage, until the lights go out or the curtain comes down the dead must stay dead: in a gallery the lights stay bright and the object won't exit – so the viewer has to.

### Close the Deal

Accounts of postmodern performativity are rich with descriptions of performance art's capacity for disassembling Cartesian dualities.<sup>28</sup> The ideal is that this dissembling of dualities brings us closer to a more participatory culture where opposition no longer provides the primary basis for the production of meaning. The ruling term or the status quo is decentered and must relinquish the authority to describe, control, authenticate the other. Postmodern performativity

is a radical critique of the quest for authenticity. The metaphor of alienation (of being distanced) was commensurate with existentialist concepts of a self divided, made inauthentic, forced by mass society to act in "bad faith" and to live as a representation. Presently, a feeling of alienation from mass society seems to have been replaced by its opposite – a feeling of being held too close, in beyond the limits of focus, enveloped by the digital, the interactive, the global. Existentialist alienation finds its inverse in the participation and performativity which is required by late capitalism. I must consider, then, that the performative describes not only my potential agency as I act out the roles which society ascribes, but my participation in a scene in which I can change my outfit, alter my inflections, improvise my lines; but I can't stop acting, doing, speaking. The diabolical side of creating one's reality is – that you can't stop.

It seems fair, however, to assume that a completely intersubjective and immersive experience is as much a fiction as the notion of an objective space outside experience. If I accept the intersubjective as a simultaneity, a co-creation of subject and object, the ability to shift positions is essential. To be free to perform such shifts we require a critical distance from an essentialized sense of being. Performance can involve methods for making strange, "alienating" one's self, one's situation, one's culture, for the purpose of recognizing these as constructions. Theatricality is one name for a mode which initiates a cognitive jump between an experience and its authenticity. The theatrical manifestation of this ambiguity layers *what could be*, on top of *what is*. Theatricality is ambiguous because it is not at odds with what it is not. Theatricality works against the smooth, immersive, *presence* of the performance, but it needs the performance to work within. Ambivalent theatricality often manifests as an error, or a lapse in judgment; it is therefore well done by amateurs. Like the sound effect which doesn't happen on time, the accent which shifts from North to South, it calls the performance into question. It is both a longing and a limit. As theatricality is aligned with excess, disguise, false accents and ambiguity, it is not easily codified or willfully reproduced. Once codified into a style, theatricality ceases to become excessive

or obtuse, but shifts toward an obvious meaning. What seems theatrical or excessive, or what appears as a disguise, changes from era to era as it bubbles over from attempts to signify an obvious meaning. As our cultural appetite for inauthenticity grows, we can only imagine where the theatrical will manifest next.

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A note: This essay originally began with a more lengthy discussion of performance and performance art. I have cut it down to the parts which seem most pertinent to this exhibition in that they engage notions of theatricality.

## Notes

1 My own practice has paralleled the shifting valuation of the term theatrical. As an art student in the early 1980's I inherited, as one does, without much reflection, a pejorative use of the term. If we said a work was "theatrical" we meant it was manipulative of the audience and dependent upon being staged. As I began to do work which I and others considered to be "performance art" I looked for ideas concerning the then relatively untheorized practice. Very often I encountered performance-art explained simply as "not theatre". (For instance, Eric Metcalfe, who since 1975 has been the curator of performance art at the Western Front, used this definition repeatedly in conversation and public discussion to make clear performance art's link with the visual arts rather than theatre.) In retrospect, I realize that I was engaging an art form which was, at that moment, negotiating between the values of modernism and postmodernism.

2 Michel Benamou: *Presence and Play*. In: *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. Eds. Michel Benamou and Charles Carmello. Milwaukee: Wisc. Center for Twentieth Century Studies 1977, p. 3.

3 Douglas Crimp: Pictures. In: *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. Ed. Brian Wallis, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston, MA: David R. Godine, pp. 179–87.

4 Henry Sayre: *The object of performance: the American avant-garde since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989, pp. XI–XIV.

5 Marvin A. Carlson: *Performance, a critical introduction*. London: Routledge 1996, p. 5.

6 Peggy Phelan: *Unmarked: the politics of performance*. London, New York: Routledge 1993, p. 146.

7 Fried was a disciple of the famous modernist critic Clement Greenberg. Fried took issue with what he called Greenberg's "ahistoricism" but championed many of the same artists and pursued a fundamentally late modernist way of looking at art.

8 Michael Fried: *Art and objecthood: essays and reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 125.

9 Philip Auslander: *From acting to performance: essays in modernism and postmodernism*. London, New York: Routledge 1997, p. 52.

10 Ibid, p. 57.

11 It is precisely in opposition to this duration that Fried feels successful modernist works such as those by Caro or Olitski "defeat" theatre. "I want to claim that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre." (Fried, 146)

12 Umberto Eco: *The Semiotics of Theatrical Performance*. In: *The Drama Review* (1977), Vol. 21, pp. 107–117; 113.

13 Donna Jeanne Haraway: *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books 1991, p. 198.

14 Ibid, p. 199.

15 Auslander gives a detailed account of this history.

16 The latter is the argument of Amelia Jones in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press 1998, the former of Henry Sayre in *The Object of Performance*.

17 For instance in the USA: Paul McCarthy sometimes in collaboration with Mike Kelley, Yvonne Rainer in her 1996 film *Murder and murder*, the videos of Cecelia Doherty. In Canada: Warren Arcan, Jonathan Wells, Geoffry Farmer, Phillip McCrum.

18 Roland Barthes: *The Third Meaning*. In: *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*. Tr. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press 1985, p. 48.

19 Ibid, pp. 48, 49.

20 Ibid, p. 49.

21 Andrea Olsen: *Bodystories: A Guide to experimental anatomy*. New York: Station Hill Press 1991, p. 15.

22 Jon Erickson: *The fate of the object: from modern object to post-modern sign in performance, art, and poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1995, pp. 4, 5.

23 Question of distance seem increasingly important in our compressed contemporary existence. Martin Heidegger begins his essay *The Thing* (1950) with a rumination on the loss of distance and the corresponding loss of a sense of nearness. Paul Virilio and Fredrick Jameson both suggest a flattening effect, an eradicating of distance at work in late capitalist culture and our technologies of reproduction. More than paradigms for consciousness, questions of distance (and corresponding questions of space and duration) describe the conditions in which our consciousness exists. In my

experience, performance, particularly live performance, has the potential to instate a reciprocity between performer and audience which reinvigorates the distance between.

24 Erickson, op. cit., p. 66.

25 Theatricality is not synonymous with notions of "masquerade" which have been theorized in relation to the construction of the feminine. Masquerade works on the level of the obvious meaning – the constructed nature of which can be critically deconstructed – but is not necessarily made ambivalent or obtuse.

26 Cinematic convention quickly established that it is necessary to cut before the actor leaves the room otherwise one is left with a shot of an empty room and such a shot is usually seen as devoid of narrative impulse.

27 Paul-Louis Landsberg develops this idea of death as an absent presence and a present absence in *The Experience of Death*, published in *Essays in Phenomenology*. Eds. Maurice Natanson, Martinus Nijhoff. The Hague: 1966, pp. 198–204, particularly p. 196.

28 For instance, Amelia Jones in describing the project of her book, *Body Art, Performing the Subject*: "It [the book] is also an exploration of body art as an instantiation of the profound shift in the conception and experience of subjectivity that has occurred over the past three decades. Schneemann's and Kusama's performative self-exposures, their enactments of themselves as both author and object, dramatize this shift; these projects insistently post the subject as *intersubjective* (contingent on the other) rather than complete within itself (the Cartesian subject who is centered and fully self-knowing in his cognition). These projects make clear that the Cartesian "I think therefore I am", the logic powering modernist art theory and practice wherein the body (privileged as male) is transcended through pure thought or creation, is no longer viable in the decentering regime of postmodernism (if it ever was)." (Jones, 10)



**Judy Radul**

*And So Departed (Again)*, 2003





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