

What's your problem?  
Performance Art and the Question of Value.

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The questions that you ask are ones that have troubled me for some time. They concern me as someone who practices performance, they concern me as an art educator, and they concern me as a commentator on the contemporary art world. In my role as director of fine art I urge my student to constantly interrogate their practice, to guard against complacency, and to avoid the lure of easy answers. If I am going to ask this of the next generation of artists I must also apply these strictures to my own practice.

There is no denying that performance art can appear, even be, esoteric. It would be disingenuous to suggest that it is easily accessible and has broad appeal. Even for some involved in the artworld its lack of clear boundaries pose a problem. It is impossible to speak of performance art as if it was a unified art form, with a set of defining rules or guidelines. Performance artists come from numerous disciplines and bring the heritage and methods of their disciplines with them - be it theatre, dance, or fine art. Each practice has distinctive approaches and understanding of what performance entails.

My background is fine art, and my entry into the world of performance comes via the legacy of Hugo Ball, Dada, and Cabaret Voltaire. This history, coupled with an interest in ephemerality and the consequence of the non-existent artifact to a culture steeped in reverence for durability led me to explore what remains once we have experienced an event. I am also interested in the origins of performance in Europe and the attempt by artists to find a new means of expression in the face of the trauma of the First World War. For me this stands as a significant moment in the development of western creative production. The promise of modernity and the benefits of progress had delivered in the form of new types of machinery, whereby unprecedented numbers of people could be killed. The reality that progress had brought us to this point has held a fascination for me because it still remains a pertinent cause for consideration.

So this is where we are. This is what progress has brought us too?

Apart from my practice as an artist I have another existence - as an academic I regularly contribute to academic publications and conferences. These conferences afford an opportunity to engage with the discipline, to try out new ideas, to get feedback on work in progress, to contribute to the development of the area, and to develop link for collaboration. I see performance festivals as serving an equivalent function. It allows performance artist to do all the things a conference does, with the added dimension that it is done in public. The audiences for performance are likely to be art world insiders, like most conceptual art, however academic conferences also have a limited audience without the constant questioning of worth that surrounds performance festivals. The fact is that performance, like an academic paper, does not have a direct mass

appeal, but like a paper it has an indirect effect. Both contribute to the conversation about what it is to be a thinking and developing species. Creativity exists in many forms, which are divided into arbitrary categories. Some of human creativity is expressed in the form of feats of engineering, sometimes as developments in medicine and sometimes as performance. They all have one thing in common – somewhere one day someone tried something new. They discussed their ideas with other people in their field, and developed their thinking. Performance doesn't promise to cure anyone or build towers but the soft power of art can forge links with individuals from different cultures, it can provide a forum for expression of ideas that have not yet be subsumed into the mainstream. Performance does not create a commodity, but this is also true of other forms of human production. A performance can be documented in numerous ways and presented in a variety of forms that become commodities. Does performance need to stop apologizing? So what, it is ephemeral and so are raspberries, sunsets, dragonflies, and people.