

Unpredictable Temporalities: The Body and Performance in (Art) History

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Due to its dependence on remains (documents, archives, memories), performance notoriously complicates the writing of histories, at the very least raising questions of how the time-based, embodied work is *remembered*. Performance also, from an art historical point of view, has the potential to thwart the structures of aesthetic judgment still central to art history and its related disciplines and institutions (art criticism, curating, the art market, and so on). This essay is about this potential of performance to put pressure on how we write history and to throw in question particularly the structures of art history, which has conventionally depended on the predictability (and commodifiability) of static objects that are neatly archived, or displayed in order to be viewed and evaluated. There are compelling reasons to look at how past performance works are being historicized and discussed in an art context, so often informed by the pressures of the high stakes international art marketplace. For example, questions

of what works get excluded in this historicization in the art context are of pressing political importance. I will attend here as well, then, to the ways in which art criticism has tended to leave out specific histories, and thus specific bodies, in order to purvey supposedly “new” ideas about art trends. The stakes here are high, because the histories that get told, and the ways in which they get told, determine what we remember and how we construct and view ourselves today.

The potential of performance to thwart structures of art history and aesthetic judgment in particular is linked to its temporality and ephemerality. Dominant modes of art history and art criticism, as suggested, still tend to ignore or disavow these qualities because they thwart structures of judgment; the art context tends to reduce performance artworks to singular iconic documents, which fit into structures of value in the art world. But such reduction not only, obviously, compromises the texture of the live art event, it also fails to make use of the radical challenge performance poses to the very ways in which we write art histories. To this end, I will argue here for a more careful attention to modes of writing art criticism and history, modes that *take account of* (rather than ignoring or disavowing) the durational, and the circuits of desire it opens up, in order to produce more ethical and nuanced histories that more accurately convey the range and complexity of works from the past.

While it is by definition durational and thus to some degree ephemeral, leaving scanty or partial remains in archives of one sort or another, performance can easily, through interpretive models set on determining final meanings, be frozen in time and/or explicitly commodified.¹ The potential for performance to put pressure on history writing and art critical value systems—to dislocate fixities and/or to refuse commodification—is thus far from being an inherent or inevitable quality of performance art as it comes to be known in history. In order to keep the disorienting pressures of performance “alive,” allowing it to reanimate otherwise reified structures of meaning and value in the art context, the art historian can seek to reactivate the durationality of past live artworks, excavating and re-narrating their traces in creative and self-reflexive ways so as to attend to her own unease and lack of finality in positioning herself in relation to them. She can productively acknowledge the absolute impossibility of “knowing” these works and of giving them final form or value through interpretation—no matter how extensive the archive and remains relating to the work. At the same time, the art historian must take a position and

propose assertive potential meanings for the works—for what would be the purpose of thinking historically, without such attempts at narrating the significance of events and objects created in the past? I hope to make a strong political argument for why keeping these tensions in play is a crucial gesture in the study of live art, and indeed the writing of history in general.

Art History's Frames and the Decontaining Potential of Performance

European Enlightenment philosophers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries defined a notion of aesthetics that is still crucial to how fantasies of the “immaterial” function in relation to the visual arts. European aesthetics has first and foremost a *containing* function. Most influentially for modernist art criticism, Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment* is an elaboration of a method for framing the unknowable aspects of subjects and objects—for explaining how human subjects relate to the objects in the world, and how some objects (crudely put) are understood as “aesthetic,” or are “art,” while others are not. Kantian aesthetics most famously is predicated on the elimination of sensual “interest” on the part of the person who makes the aesthetic judgment—this person must thus be *disinterested*, not invested in a bodily or sensual way, in the artwork).

As Jacques Derrida puts it, Kantian aesthetics is thus a *parergon* or discursive (and ideological) *frame* that is put in place to contain or exclude the potentially scary, fleshy, joyous, wounded, and/or abject vicissitudes of embodied human experience. This frame prohibits the attachments of embodied desire and “[a]rt (in general) ... is inscribed here,” inside its borders. The “inside” of art, defined by the logic of aesthetics as the true artwork, is established and contained by the frame, which keeps art safe from the threatening abjection of the “outside” (particularly the ever-present dangers of bodily pleasure or affect in general).² If the aesthetic is thus geared towards what art historian Lynda Nead has argued to be “the creation of distinct boundaries to one's sense of self, the creation of an absolute distinction between the spiritual and the corporeal,” then clearly the live enactments of bodies presented as “art” completely destroy its most basic premises, as do works presented in non-sanctioned exhibition spaces, soliciting non-traditional audiences in performative and temporally extended ways.³

Works that activate the body over time within the frame of art, then, activate the “decontaining” potential of performance: the way in which it can refuse the boundary-making function of aesthetics and its contemporary corollaries including art criticism, art marketing, curating, and the writing of art histories. If the aesthetic frames and delimits, then performance can work to “unframe” the messy embodiment that constitutes our relationship to spaces and things, but only if the interpretive models we employ to analyze and historicize it remain equally *active* and open to contingency. The body, in its unpredictable temporalities, cannot be properly included in the aesthetic or written into art history, at least not without some serious distortions. The remainder of this essay will explore some of the distortions that occur daily to encompass live and performance art within the purview of art history, art criticism, and the markets attached to these, as well as some of the ways in which moments of unpredictability, extrusions of desire, and/or slivers of affect might escape the frame of the aesthetic (which so often, if not inevitably, becomes the frame of the marketplace) itself.

“Cornered,” Again

This potential of the intersecting strategies and tendencies of live art to “unframe” aesthetic assumptions was developed dramatically in Euro-American art from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Across Fluxus, Happenings, conceptualism, minimalism, body art, process art, performance, video art, as well as across the rights movements that worked through political activism in tandem with these aesthetic experiments, artists explored the potential of “situations” to shift the reified logic of aesthetics as it had apparently found its conservative end-point in abstract painting, with its corollary formalist criticism. In this reified system of modernist formalism, the artwork was required to be, in the notorious words of Michael Fried, “wholly manifest,” fully *contained* and *framed*.⁴

I encountered a situation in 2009 in Berlin that reminded me of this history. Installed as part of the In Transit 09 performance festival at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Adrian Piper’s *Everything #5.2* (2004) draws me in: the piece consists of what looks to be a headstone mounted in a diagonal wall carved out of a corner of the gallery, interrupting the silent authority of the white cube by making it less than cubic.⁵ The piece is a poignant cenotaph, mounted diagonally in a newly minted wall across

the sliced away corner of the gallery. Highly reflective, it looks to be a mirror, but on closer inspection is mirrored glass, revealing the guts of the gallery wall behind a shining surface. We can see ourselves in it, our bodies meshing with what is normally “outside” the frame of the aesthetic (the guts of the gallery wall, visible through the mirror); we are layered with the text: “Everything Will be Taken Away.” Piper’s piece, physically static, nonetheless evokes memory, history, embodiment, literally mirroring the viewer and thus bringing the static work to life in the present. “Everything” was, clearly, taken away in 1961 when the Berlin Wall was constructed, dividing families and shattering Germany’s fragile sense of itself as a nation after its defeat in WWII. Everything will be taken away when death arrives. This statement resonates on multiple levels in relation to the spatial politics of *Everything #5.2*.

Standing in the corner perusing the piece, I am also telescoped back into art history. I am reminded of Piper’s 1988 *Cornered*, in which a television mounted in the corner of the gallery above a table barricading us from Piper herself who speaks on the monitor, dressed demurely in pearls admonishing (cornering) us in an anti-racist harangue, the words of which belie her clothing and sweet demeanor.⁶ Piper’s legacy of producing works that insistently interrogate our sense of where we belong in the world haunts *Everything #5.2*; since around 1970 her work has strategically staged reciprocal relations between viewers and her own insistent “presence” (via her own body in earlier performance works and self-portrait video works or photographs, or through the assertion of her point of view through text or situational cues), constructing complex spatial, textual, and visual encounters. Cutting into the physical walls of the gallery itself, *Everything #5.2* is thus a conceptual interrogation of the power of institutions to confer aesthetic value but also a political commentary on the Berlin Wall as well. As she has noted, the piece is a personal commentary on her choice to move to Berlin and to address her disillusionment with the United States, where she lived until recently.⁷

If we have bodily memories of Piper’s previous works, we will no doubt be thrown back to the *Corner Piece* to find ourselves solicited again as implicated in the work, our sense of who we are once again opened up by a configuration in space through which the artist enunciates a position from her own “corner.” Cornering *us* metaphorically in return.

This piece harkens back to a legacy of conceptual space-bending practices—or, as it was sometimes called at the time, “situation aesthetics” (in

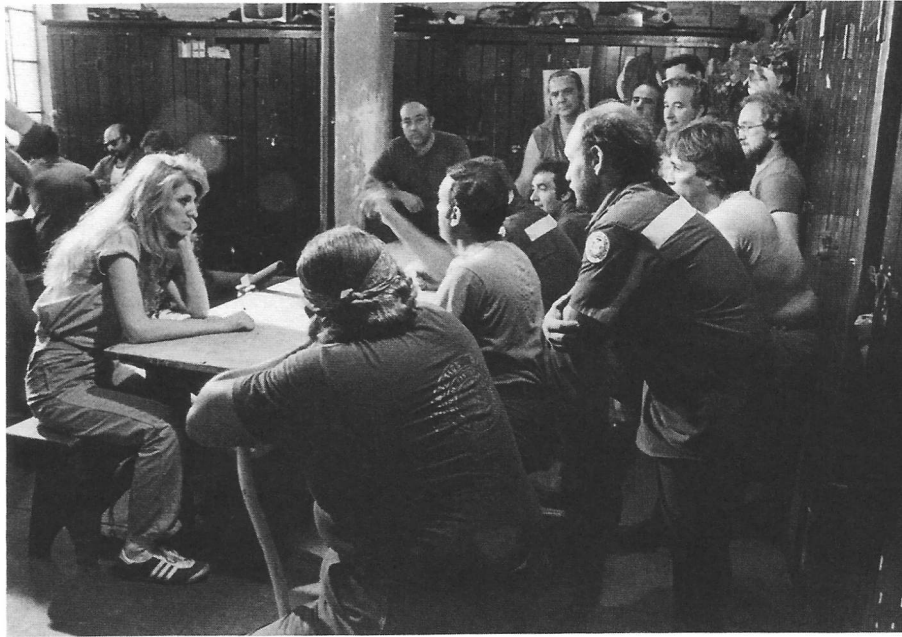
which artists began “seeking ways to extend the art audience” through performance, video, film, and other media and sites not traditional in accepted art practice⁸)—which developed from the late 1950s and following. These situational practices transform sculpture into installation, performance into artworks—and both into interactive experiences; galleries become cultural statements and bodies are activated in relation to spatial coordinates in ways that put pressure on the containing function of the aesthetic. Situational works also, per the contemporaneous pressures of identity politics, initially called for an acknowledgment on the part of audience members of their implication in the identifications accruing to the work’s cultural and political situation and, correlatively, reflexively back to the “artist” as an assumed or fantasized origin of the work. Happenings, Fluxus, body art, conceptual art, minimalism, process art, land art, and earthworks; feminist art, queer art, Black, Chicano, and other practices putting “identity” front and center as an aspect of making and interpretation: all of these tendencies burst open the “artwork” package that had served to make art safe, as a category and value, since the grip of aesthetics took hold in late eighteenth-century Europe. All of them exploded the idea of the artwork as “wholly manifest” within itself, calling upon later viewers to engage them through situational and *performative relations* of meaning making.

Allan Kaprow and Suzanne Lacy, both based in California by 1970, are key figures in these developing modes of situational and activist art practice as they developed in the US. It was Kaprow who, in his epochally influential and insightful 1958 essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” drew on the existentialist language of art critic Harold Rosenberg to argue for a performative reading of Pollock’s painting as *act* (in a situation) rather than final *product*, even as he worked with colleagues such as George Segal to develop the radical Happenings staged in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the New York area. By the 1970s Kaprow was at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia and then at the University of California San Diego, spreading his ideas in the art school context. Kaprow’s influence—as spread through his teaching and through the archival and now to some degree art historically narrated remains of his performance works—has been profound on generations of artists coming to maturity from the late 1960s onward.⁹

By the early 1970s, too, artists such as Mierle Ukeles, Martha Rosler, and Suzanne Lacy began to produce scholarship, writing, curating, and

performative, activist public artworks that exemplify the production of culture as embodied, reciprocal, and traversing and activating public spaces in ways that are emphatically activist and critical of the closed systems of modernist art and art criticism. Ukeles's "maintenance works" from the early 1970s onward, for example, involved her activation of women's labor (usually behind the scenes in relation to aesthetic and other public spaces) as performance art visible to the public eye, and her activation of work itself in aesthetic contexts as "art"—as in her washing of an interior court and the front steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1973, or her project involving shaking the hands of New York City garbage collectors in the 1979–80 *Touch Sanitation* project.¹⁰

Figure 1 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance: Fresh Air Landfill*, 1977–80, sitting at a table with workers of New York City Department of Sanitation. Courtesy Ronald Wadman Fine Arts, New York. www.feldmangallery.com



Suzanne Lacy, inspired by Kaprow and by Judy Chicago, with whom she studied in the early 1970s (in the Feminist Art Program in Southern California), began to articulate a clear and focused argument for this kind of work as "new genre public art," in which politics and art are equally activated through aesthetic and performative means. In fact, Lacy's practice if anything demonstrates that art and politics are equally cultural: they are both discourses and institutions that define what and how subjects

and objects *mean*. Lacy's "archive" is multiple and unfixed—including her extensive website, and various publications in which she has asserted her critical model for understanding public, activist performance art histories.¹¹ In her 1995 book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, for example, Lacy historicizes this kind of performative activist work, providing one model for how to narrate this past work. Lacy sketches a now familiar American trajectory from the dominance of traditional models of "public art," either monumental figural sculpture or what came to be called "plop" or "plunk" art after the move in the 1970s and 1980s USA to large-scale corporate commissions that make no response to the vicissitudes of the spaces they dominate, to a questioning of this kind of work as non-responsive and coercive (epitomized by the 1980s public debates over Richard Serra's large-scale minimalist *Tilted Arc*, which eventually was dismantled from its site in the US government's Federal Plaza in downtown New York City). Plunk art, or these more corporate and abstract types of modernist sculpture, were best replaced, Lacy argues, by more politically relevant versions of art engaging communities through the activation of bodies, objects, and spaces.¹² As Lacy notes in *Mapping the Terrain*, "what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork."¹³ In this articulation, Lacy keeps in play precisely the performative nature of the *encounter* with the work that keeps it "live" in future interpretations and historical accounts.

New genre public art had been earlier exemplified by Lacy's own ambitious public performance projects such as, with Leslie Labowitz and Bia Lowe, the 1977 piece *In Mourning and in Rage*, a complex network of political/aesthetic actions in protest of the lack of attention on the part of Los Angeles media and police to the escalating series of rapes being committed in the city, culminating in a "stand-in" with women dressed in black occupying the steps of the Los Angeles City Hall—this latter action now memorialized through an iconic series of photographs and textual descriptions.¹⁴

The performative artworks and writings that continue to define Lacy's career have repeatedly demonstrated precisely the way in which art is *always already social* and *always already political* whether or not these terms are put front and center in the work. And her attention to producing archival materials from the very inception of the piece—which is aimed largely at garnering media attention during its initial performance, and

remaining “visible” for future histories through these same materials—is exemplary (all the works are documented extensively on her website, providing one possible understanding of their continued significance in the present). Lacy’s project is to produce performative situations that call upon individuals, activating their needs and desires in relation to other subjects in order to create new modes of embodiment and new public spheres and thus to shift social meanings—both at the time of the work’s initial performance, and resonating into future moments such as “today,” when I write this essay.

Figure 2: Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz (with [unintelligible]), *In Mourning* (1977).



The insertion of bodies and objects into public spaces under the aegis of the aesthetic (that is, as “artworks”), and the extension of this project via the Internet, is one way of enacting a politics beyond the traditional aesthetic frames that exclude desire and politics as if these do not already constitute all culture. However, such strategies do not ensure that the art world per se will acknowledge these practices as historically relevant. Thus, the 2000s trend in the Western art world to celebrate “relational” practices, a label originated largely by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud in essays culminating in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics* (translated into English in 2002) leaves out the history of “relational” and

“situational” works I have very schematically sketched here. It is worth looking briefly at how some models of art critical thinking dominant today continue to exclude precisely by *containing* art through trendy terms that eliminate the complexities of past performative practices.

Situational/Relational Art

A common definition of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics comes from a paraphrased version of his ideas on post.thing.net: “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”¹⁵ One of Bourriaud’s key aims in establishing this idea seems to have been to insist on the “newness” of the work, and by extension of his curatorial idea, positioning himself as an oracle of sorts. But in fact, as this definition makes clear, his concept of relational aesthetics draws on key aspects of art from the 1960s and 1970s, as we can see from the descriptions of Lacy’s work above. The most radical art of these earlier decades in fact explicitly worked to activate “the whole of human relations and their social context,” per the motivating factor of, for example, political activism motivated in Lacy’s case by feminism and the other rights movements.

It is a problem, then, that over the past decade Bourriaud and others have elaborated the idea of “relational aesthetics” as if it has more or less sprung into being out of nowhere; this exemplifies precisely the tendency of art criticism and art history I noted at the beginning of this article—the tendency to simplify the past by disavowing the potential of performative work to continue resonating through interpretive acts in the future. As the above discussions of Piper’s, Ukeles’s, and Lacy’s practices make clear, such claims are ahistorical and fixing in themselves. In fact, the entire manner in which relational aesthetics (including its “antagonistic” versions as in the work of Claire Bishop) has been articulated is superficial and misleading. It is particularly ironic that relational aesthetics, which claims a kind of premium for durational and socially situated practices, has become itself a perfect example of the erasures of history that occur in art discourse when difficult to manage durational practices from the past are left out of the picture. By claiming relationality to be “new” to the late 1990s, explicitly seeking to establish a model of 1990s Euro-American art differentiated from earlier models, Bourriaud’s model actually ignores

the vast and complex history of contemporary art's increasingly assertive opening of artwork at least since the 1950s to space, social relations, and audience participation and to time, durationality, "situation," as well as to "dematerialization," "intermediality," and a general *reciprocity* among maker, work, and interpreter.¹⁶

The discourse of relational aesthetics also erases its own complex theoretical legacy, which telescopes backwards to the work of mid-twentieth-century French theorists drawing on Hegelian theories of self/other relations, and thus opens to the explicit politics of the identity-based rights movements.¹⁷ Attention to situation and reciprocity is more useful than the now facile term "relational" in that the former terms automatically acknowledge the rise, after WWII, of theories of interrelatedness and intersubjectivity in understanding the human subject's complex modes of being in the world in European philosophy and visual arts discourse and practice.

For example, attention to the complex work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, culminating in his 1961 essay "The Intertwining—the Chiasm," highly influential to many Euro-American artists in the 1960s, can enrich our understanding of how art since 1960 functions and can help position "relational" works in terms of a much longer history of theories and activations of reciprocity. In "The Intertwining," Merleau-Ponty articulates a model to understand the reciprocal constitution of bodies (themselves fully subjectified) and what he calls the "flesh of the world."¹⁸ Along with theories of performativity from the work of Erving Goffman and J. L. Austin in the 1950s and 1960s, Jacques Derrida in the 1970s and 1980s, and Judith Butler in the 1990s, this range of work stressed the interrelatedness of bodies and subjects in space and time or, more specifically to the art and performance context, of artist, situation/public/space, audience. Lacy's arguments echo strongly with these theories; stressing the importance of an artwork's specific spatial and political context (its situation), Lacy thus argues: "[T]he artist's experience is thought to be represented in a visual object; such subjectivity, in fact, is taken to be fundamental to art. Performance and conceptual art helped to isolate the *process* of art, sometimes even substituting process for object."¹⁹

Relational aesthetics discourse is also disturbing in its refusal to acknowledge the politics implied by the reciprocal and situational, and the historical development of these notions towards political ends. The potential of performance, when activated in particular ways and in particular

spaces, to explode the frame of the traditional aesthetic is largely due, as Kaprow, Lacy, and others have argued, to this opening of the very concept of art to *process*, to *audience*, and thus to reciprocal spatial relationships—and this opening is explicitly political in that it foregrounds identification processes normally occluded or suppressed by the *frames* that contain the visual arts (to retain the myth of disinterestedness, of the possibility of the object being “wholly manifest”). It is all the more bizarre, given this politically charged history of the relational (the reciprocal and situational), that Bourriaud’s theory does not just sidestep performance and the rights movements that often motivated its articulations in the 1960s and 1970s; it explicitly rejects politically motivated theories of visual arts practice:

It is in this sense that we can talk of a community effect in contemporary art. It does not involve those corporate phenomena which too often act as a disguise for the most die-hard forms of conservatism (in this day and age, feminism, anti-racism and environmentalism all operate too frequently as lobbies playing the power game by enabling it never to have to call itself into question in a structural way).²⁰

For Bourriaud, relational aesthetics functions at the *expense* of the very vicissitudes of identification and embodiment that feminism, other rights movements, and theories and practices of performance—all *fundamental tendencies in the establishment of relational strategies*—have insistently foregrounded. Bourriaud suggests, rather, that the so-called “relational” work apparently magically (and in a completely *contained* and disembodied fashion) sprung from nowhere in the late 1990s. Arguing that relational works of this period inspire conviviality and build community, aiming towards “learning to inhabit the world in a better way,” Bourriaud erases the history of community-building and models of utopian social change as developed in the 1960s and 1970s.²¹

Art historian Claire Bishop rightly criticizes Bourriaud on the grounds that he argues for a convivial rather than antagonistic relation between artist and audience, but otherwise keeps the basic premises of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics in place. Both theorists posit structures of meaning that revert to modernist models of viewing meaning and value as ultimately residing with the artist and then embedded in the work “itself,” as conveniently excavated by the knowing (and thus authoritative) critic.²² Bishop thus, disturbingly, reverts to the modernist fantasy that it

is possible for art to be autonomous from the social, arguing that today “art has become all too subsumed into everyday life—as leisure, entertainment, and business—artists such as [Thomas] Hirschhorn are reasserting the autonomy of artistic activity.”²³ She argues as well that artists such as Hirschhorn thus produce (presumably inherently) “better art”—contradicting her own claim, against Bourriaud’s call for an art that produces a positive, convivial relationship, that this “better art” involves a “mode of artistic experience more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today.”²⁴ For if there is an inherently “better art,” then this implies an inherently “complete” subject—Bishop can’t have it both ways. Again, the closures of art discourse eradicate the potential of performance to keep meaning alive (a potential, it should be clear, that is only realized by interpreters who understand the contingency of meaning as they relate to the traces of the work existing in the moment of looking and interpreting).

Most worryingly, both theorists erase or (in Bishop’s case) downplay past histories—including the subtle and complex political insights afforded by attention to past “situational” practices such as those of Kaprow, Ukeles, and Lacy. Bourriaud completely ignores the fact that this building of community has long of course been central to the very identity politics he excoriates in his own theory—the concept of conviviality or sharing experiences between artist and audience *as such* only exists in this way as it developed out of the modes of practice feminist artists, in particular, put into play in the 1960s and 1970s as sketched very briefly here. Finally, Bourriaud’s return to the very terms of intersubjectivity that have been central to poststructuralist theory (including, as noted above, performance theory) as well as visual arts practices from the 1960s and following (largely, as I have noted here, performance, body-oriented, and linked to the rights movements) betrays his own reliance on the very discourses he, again, dismisses in the quote above: “As part of a ‘relationist’ theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its ‘environment,’ its ‘field’ (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice.”²⁵ So much for Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono, Adrian Piper, Suzanne Lacy, and hundreds of other important artists—not to mention theorists and supporters of performance, feminism, anti-racist, and other practices linked to what Bourriaud rather contemptuously terms the “community effect”—from Willoughby Sharp to Lucy Lippard, Lea Vergine and beyond.

While Bourriaud’s formulations seem at best ignorant (of the artists

and scholars from the past to whom he owes his ideas) and at worst self-serving (a wilful erasure of his predecessors the better to claim his own originality?), the important point here is that a relational aesthetic (whether calling for conviviality *or* antagonism), as long as it still falls back ultimately on old-fashioned ideas of “better art” and thus on a very old art historical logic of containment, is not only *not* solving any problems in forging an understanding of how these forms of art function socially and artistically—it is surely creating new ones. For this supposedly “new” debate seems awfully familiar to someone well versed in histories of modern and contemporary art histories. Bourriaud and Bishop fall back on what Derrida called the “divine teleology” of aesthetic framing to substantiate their own opinions as fact.²⁶ This dynamic begs the question of how many times, across how many terrains and along how many temporal trajectories, artists and theorists have to work to make their performative, activist practices visible in history—through strategies such as Lacy’s careful archiving and extensive website. How can a politically motivated artist avoid (at the worst) being erased or (at best) the flattening effect of such framing (marketing) strategies as Bourriaud’s and Bishop’s, with their claims for inherent meanings and effects? How can an artist such as Lacy retain the potential of performance to *make people think*, if art historians and critics simply “freeze” the work by establishing its meaning and value as final, or freeze it out of history altogether?

The most disturbing aspect of the claims made in such supposedly new (but in fact very old and predictable) discourses is this very stubborn refusal to acknowledge the earlier theories and practices that have provided the very terms they themselves borrow and rework. These earlier works, if fully contemplated and brought back into the historical picture, would make critics and curators such as Bourriaud and Bishop at least feel *uncomfortable* in positing such simplistic and reifying models of relationality and in erasing or downplaying the importance of decades of highly complex and sophisticated work. More respectful and careful attention to these past theories and practices, with their insistence on the specificities of bodies and temporalities as these open up the “divine teleology” that secures traditional aesthetics, would challenge the very terms set for relational aesthetics.

Space, Situation, and the INTERrelational

Merleau-Ponty suggests, we are always already embedded in the flesh of the world (always already reciprocally engaged with the spaces and bodies around us), then art has never been the discrete bounded thing that modernism dreamed it to be (fully complete or “wholly manifest” in itself; in Bishop’s terms, “better, or worse, art). As my very sketchy reminders of the complex histories of Euro-American art in the 1960s and 1970s here should make clear, artists have for at least five decades been exploring ways of de-containing what art can be—tying it openly and in charged ways to the spaces and bodies that give it meaning and value. Very often these efforts took place through the force of the performative. It has been all too easy, then, to forget or erase them by ignoring their traces.

It is important to stress again that performance and body art are by no means inherently or necessarily radical or unhooking of the aesthetic (their inclusion in recent years in the very markets and histories that used to refuse them is testament to this fact). But this de-manifesting, or un-framing, of art, I want to argue, has nonetheless most effectively and consistently taken place through performative and bodily strategies, which, precisely, have the potential to de-contain (to release explosions of that which cannot be contained: smells, durational temporalities, excessive desires, blood and other bodily fluids, boredom, feelings, and more).

One fact alone should make us take these strategies extremely seriously: artists who have identified with (or who have been made to identify with) non-normative subjectivities such as queer, Black, female, third world, disabled, working class have much more often drawn on these aspects of creativity (embodiment and performance) than have artists who have more of a stake in maintaining the “containments” that maintain the status quo of aesthetics and its markets. It is thus hardly a surprise that most of the artists heralded by critics such as Bishop seeking to fix what is “good” and “bad” art are once again economically enfranchised Euro-American men, from Spaniard Santiago Sierra to Swiss Thomas Hirschhorn.²⁷

In closing, let me just note another way of thinking about (provisionally framing?) trends on the international art scene, still dominated, it must be stressed, by the markets in New York and London. Rather than proposing a trendy brand name such as relational aesthetics (which simply conflates outmoded notions of aesthetics with a supposedly new model of happy or antagonistic subject/object relations), why not develop a far

more historically aware proposal that foregrounds insights gleaned from what we can understand of past cultural forays into embodiment, performativity, reciprocity, interrelationality? This proposal, itself open to interpretive vicissitudes, would need to take account not only of the people supposedly engaging in cultural spaces as the result of performative projects by artists (such as those claimed by Bourriaud to be the avatars of relational aesthetics, including Rikrit Tiravanija, Santiago Sierra, and Liam Gillick—the key figures all men). It would also need to take account of the bodies of those who interpret (Bourriaud's own, for example) and the spaces and discourses that enframe and define such practices—or not: after all, I am suggesting it is the messy and difficult-to-contain aspects provoked by artistic projects that affords them the potential of *doing something* that might shift the terms of the aesthetic in ways that might prick our emotions and thus potentially lead to shifting our sense of being in the world.

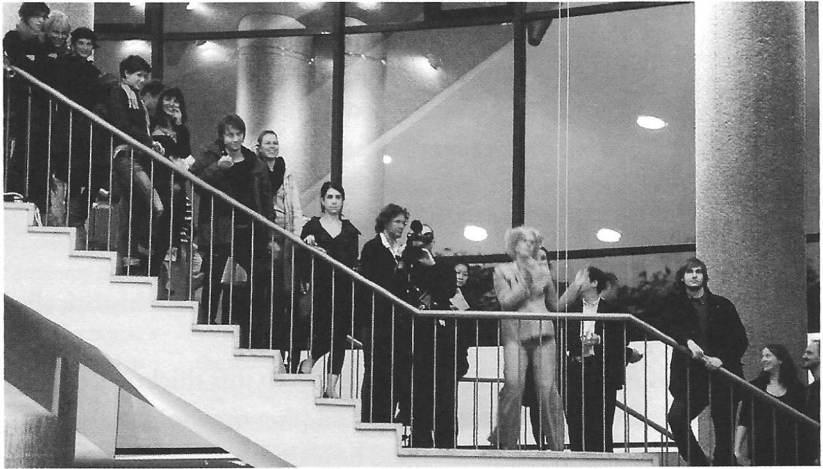
The point here is to allow ourselves to be moved and, if ever so slightly, *changed* by the work we “relationally” engage. The point is to activate and *become activated by* the traces of past performative works, all the while retaining an awareness of how these processes of activation are occurring. As it is, the relational effects of such practices are too rigidly contained by the discourse of relational aesthetics. There is nothing in Bourriaud's or Bishop's interpretations of artworks that shows anything but a very modernist top-down approach to criticism—they show no effect (and no affect) from the work they claim “relationally” engages them.

To this end, I propose the notion of interrelationality: a chiasm with a twist. I suggest that we need to look at each project individually as it enacts and affects specific bodies within the complexities of its unfolding over time in particular spaces. Which spaces? Which bodies are engaged? For how long and in what ways? What kinds of discomfort are performed, opened up, elicited and by whom (by artists, models, actors, visitors, visitors-as-actors, etc.)? What does this discomfort potentially *do* to our attempts to bring the work back to a framework such as “better art,” or “relational aesthetics”? And, the crucial question historically, how are such moments of affect and potential change *registered historically*? How have we accessed them in the present tense of our interpretation?

A second work at the In Transit 09 Performing Arts Festival in Berlin in 2009 serves as a fitting closing point for these ruminations: Nevin Aladag's *Occupation*.

Awaiting the introductory speeches to the event at opening night by, among others, the curator André Lepecki, I stand with tired feet in a milling crowd in the foyer of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Suddenly a woman standing on the stairs begins to twitch and whirl in space, as if animated by puppet strings from above; across the way another man starts gyrating; a third, fourth, fifth person begins to dance as if to silent music. The speeches begin and more and more dancers jerk and pulsate. It's impossible to tell which dancers were "hired" by the artist (better named a choreographer?), given instructions to dance in order to compose the piece *Occupation*, and which are simply visitors to the show getting inspired. Finally, the speeches over, music begins pulsating loudly in the space, filling it with the very sound that we had anticipated through the moving bodies of the dancers.

Figure 3 Nevin Bunting, *Occupation*, 2009, Documentation of performative action at Transit Performing Arts Festival, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. Image shows the organizer of the festival, André Lepecki, giving his opening speech.



The meaning of the space as an official "site" for official "performance art" has been subtly shifted away from being dominated by a rather tensely orchestrated series of installations and performances across a conglomeration of rooms, to a lively activated social arena. Allan Kaprow's model of thinking about art comes to mind: from his 1958 identification of a new art situation in which the viewer who approaches Jackson Pollock's paintings becomes "participant ... rather than observer" to his 1968 ambition to produce works with "an absolute flow between event and environment" in which bodies move and make social meaning.²⁸

Spatial activation becomes activist.

To what ends I'm not sure, but I feel that this is OK. I feel my body, mirroring the gyrations of these unpredictable (and unpredictably bursting forth) dancers—after a day of “seeing” art on walls (or into walls, as with the Piper piece) and “thinking” such activation in an art context is welcome.

Objects and bodies in such spaces activated in this way are drawn out of themselves.

The chiasm invokes, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the thickness of the body, the “sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.”²⁹ His compatriot Henri Bergson, writing sixty years before Merleau-Ponty, noted:

Here are external images, then my body, and lastly, the changes brought about by my body in the surrounding images. I see plainly how external images influence the image that I call my body: they transmit movement to it. And I also see how this body influences external images: it gives back movement to them. My body is, then, in the aggregate of the material world, an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the matter in which it shall restore what it shall receive.³⁰

Bergson and Merleau-Ponty bring us full circle historically and theoretically.

It makes sense, I think, to return to this thickness of the body, as articulated through durationality and phenomenological notions of embodiment, in order to understand how things from the past, available through traces in the present, come to mean. Not only insofar as they can then be formatted into a slot in the next global marketplace of ideas, but so they can continue to provoke, over time, through bodily engagement ... pricking, probing, twitching our optic *and* haptic nerves where they count.

As Lacy suggested, it's such encounters that are themselves activating and political.

As Piper's work has long urged us to do, they might encourage us to respond to being cornered by fighting back.

As Aladag's project inspires us to take on, they might incite us to see, move, and feel in response; to let the mind be affected.

Notes

* A different version of this article was published as "Performance: Time, Space and Cultural Value," in *One Day Sculpture [New Zealand]*, ed. David Cross and Claire Doherty (Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2009).

1 I have argued this point extensively in relation to Marina Abramović's recent performance projects, and others have contributed to making this argument. See my article "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45. For example, Melanie Gilligan has recently argued, drawing on the work of Sven Lütticken, that live art (particularly, perhaps, works encompassed by what curator Nicolas Bourriaud has termed "relational aesthetics") can just as easily function to "repurpose ... the ethos of dematerialization to emulate capital's own desire of an immaterial economy that transcends the clumsy production of objects." Gilligan, "The Beggar's Pantomime: Performance and its Appropriations," *Artforum* 45, no. 10 (Summer 2007): 431; Gilligan is paraphrasing Lütticken from his book *Secret Publicity* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005). See also Lütticken's "Progressive Striptease: Performance Ideology Past and Present," in *Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: In-spect Press 2012), pp. 187–98; and Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002).

2 See Derrida, *Truth in Painting*

(1978), trans. Geoff Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially pp. 38, 63.

3 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 23.

4 See Victor Burgin, "Situational Aesthetics," first published in *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969): 118–21, reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 883–85; and Nancy Foote, ed., "Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience," *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (January 1980): 22–29. Michael Fried, in "Art and Objecthood" (1967), reprinted in *Minimalism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), p. 145.

5 Piper is not the first to carve into the gallery in this way, of course. There was a moment in the art world, around 1990, when numerous artists carved holes in gallery walls and floors, destroyed walls, etc. Not surprisingly one of the most aggressive examples of this trend was initiated by Chris Burden whose 1986 *Exposing the Foundations of the Museum* project involved digging out a massive hole in the floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (this piece was an extension of his 1985 wrecking ball "sculpture," *Samson: Installation Designed to Destroy the Space It's Exhibited In*).

6 This resonance is not coincidental. Piper writes in the program notes for the piece (handed out at In Transit 09): "Formally Everything #5.2 revisits the structure of *Cornered* (1988) ... and metaphorically upends it by removing the

walls that created the corner in the first place."

7 See *ibid.*

8 See Foote, "Situation Esthetics," p. 22.

9 The events surrounding the large Kaprow retrospective "Allan Kaprow: Art as Life" (2008, Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles), which included re-dos of some of his important Happenings and took place just after his death, enlisted the participation of a number of his previous students, such as Lacy. See the book connected to the show, which includes materials from the Kaprow archives held at the J. Paul Getty Research Institute, *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life*, ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann, Andrew Perchuk, and Stephanie Rosenthal (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Research Institute, 2008).

10 On these and other works, see Lisa Gabrielle Mark, "Mierle Laderman Ukeles," in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Constance Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 311.

11 Her website can be found at: <http://suzannelacy.com/>

12 This move was largely sparked by the US government's National Endowment for the Arts, with its "Art in Public Places" initiative, which spurred businesses and local governments to provide percent for art programmes to fund public art. See Lacy's preface in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 21.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

14 See Lacy's statement on

the piece: www.suzannelacy.com/1970sviolence_mourning.htm

15 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

16 This argument is drawn from my main introduction, "The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History," to the book *Perform Repeat Record*. On these precedents see, respectively, Alan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News* 57, no. 6 (October 1958): 24–26, 55–57; Burgin, "Situational Aesthetics"; Lucy Lip-pard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966–1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," in *Dé-coll/age (décollage)* n° 6, ed. Wolf Vostell (Frankfurt: Typos Verlag; New York: Something Else Press, 1967), accessible online at: www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/Higgins/intermedia2.html

17 I sketch the intellectual history of this development in my book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), see pp. 37–46.

18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—the Chiasm," in *Visible and the Invisible* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130–55.

19 Lacy, "Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art," in *Mapping the Terrain*, p. 174.

20 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 67.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

22 Grant Kester's new book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), makes a powerful extended critique of Bourriaud's and Bishop's theories, posing an alternative model for evaluating collective and community-based art practices.

23 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 75.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

26 See Jacques Derrida, "Economi-mimesis," *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 9.

27 Bishop rejects Thai-Argentinian, New York-based artist Rikrit Tiravanija's "convivial" (in Bourriaud's terms) public meals-as-art; his work, it appears, is too durational, too messy, and not "antagonistic" enough for Bishop's model of critique, which looks suspiciously like a slightly updated version of early twentieth-century avant-gardism.

28 Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," pp. 26, 56; and Kaprow, interview with Richard Schechner, "Extensions in Time & Space," *TDR: The Drama Review* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 154.

29 Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—the Chiasm," p. 135.

30 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896; translation from fifth edition of 1908), trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 19.