

**THE RISE OF THE SIDEKICK:  
RENEGOTIATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMANCE ART  
AND PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION**

**Robyn Cook**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Robyn Cook

Day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2011

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## Introduction

Performance art is 'traditionally' understood as a mode of communicative display where the artist signals to an audience, "hey, look at me! I'm on! watch how skilfully and effectively I express myself" (Bauman in Auslander, 2005: 27). Thus the "presence of a performance artist in real time" is seen as central to defining the medium (Goldberg, 1988: 18). Conversely, the documentation of performance art has been viewed purely as a practical addendum to the performance as a live-spectacle. Like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, or Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, performance art and performance documentation have settled into a co-dependent, often antagonistic, relationship. Performance art being viewed as the 'hero,' and the documentation thereof as its 'sidekick,' – a "mere supplement to the performance act" (Erickson, 1999: 99).

The focus of this research project will attempt to reconcile performance documentation, and specifically 'theatrical' performance (a performance created with the sole intention of being documented) as a legitimate species of performance art in its own right. It has been spearheaded by an attempt to resolve my own shifting art practice from 'live-art' toward 'theatrical' performance art. Within this shift I have experienced a sense of duplicity in the presentation of a performance purely through documentation<sup>2</sup>. This has been amplified through various exhibitions; where from an audience and curatorial

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<sup>2</sup> Performance artist Laurie Anderson reports a similar sensation of "guilt" in the presentation of her performance, *United States Part 2* (1980) (Goldberg, 2004:27).

perspective, the presentation of videos and photographs by myself as a 'performance artist,' has been largely met with confusion and ambivalence<sup>3</sup>.

While artists such as Bruce Nauman have been staging performances with no audiences present, specifically for the camera, from as early as the 1970s, performance 'traditionalists' maintain that documentation defeats the very premise of performance art "since these recordings cannot qualify as live-art" (Erickson, 1999: 99). The idea that a performance artist needs to 'perform' to an audience, where the documentation is merely a by-product, is still the basis on which most performance art is seen as 'authentic' or 'genuine' (Auslander, 2005: 22 and Burnham, 1986: 15). Within this research paper I will argue that the position of performance art as a necessarily live, public spectacle is a legacy created by the seditious anti-Modernist ideologies of early anarchic performance art (Bishop, 2004: 53). I will argue that in terms of a contemporary understanding of performance art, these imperatives need no longer apply.

In order to establish the origins of this anti-Modernist position, chapter one will begin with an exploration of the development of 'traditional' performance art. As early as the turn of last century, with the Dadaist and Futurist experiments in performance, the spectacle of the 'live-act' was explored as a means to disrupt and inflame "a complacent public" (Goldberg, 2001:14). Building on

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<sup>3</sup> A number of contemporary art competitions within a South African context remove any relationship between performance art and its documentation. The Absa L'Atelier Competition, for example, clearly states under section 4 that "no performance art will be accepted" (Absa L'Atelier Art Competition, 2011). However, it does allow both video and photography. Reading between the lines, performance art is defined as a cut and dry live spectacle, the assumption thus being that a performance could not be presented within their requirements where: "video work cannot exceed 5... minutes in time," and "hanging work must not be larger than 2m x 2m" (Absa L'Atelier Art Competition, 2011). As such, performance artists need to define themselves either as a photographer or a video artist in order to complete the application process.

this early 'prototype,' the late 1960s – in Europe and America's urgency for political and social reform – saw an unprecedented rise in interest in performance activities, with performance art being "embraced as a medium in its own right" (Goldberg, 2006: 7). During this period, performance art set up a direct challenge to the prevailing Modernist orthodoxy, raging against both the commercialisation of the art-object and the gallery establishment (Goldberg, 2001:14). Through the early work of Carolee Schneeman I will explore how both the 'live-ness' of performance, and a focus on audience interaction was seen as a means to realise the "defeat of Modernism" (McEvelley, 2006: 138 and Taylor, 2005: 10). Through analogous aspects of the contemporary performance collective, Voina, I will evidence that these values are still very much the 'benchmark' for the creation of 'authentic' performance art. This chapter will serve to highlight performance art as the 'protest hero' – a medium deeply rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian politics (Burnham, 1986: 16).

In chapter two, I will explore how this anarchic form of production, and its associated 'live-ness,' leads directly to an antagonistic relationship between performance art and its documentation (McEvelley, 2006: 138). The creation of an object-based 'document' (be it photographic, video or text) seems antithetical to the anti-commodification politics of 'traditional' performance art as a necessarily live medium. Despite this dilemma, artists recognise the need to preserve performances beyond the moment of their performative manifestation. Documentation allows the work to be seen by a broader audience, and also to become a record to influence the art-historical reception

of the artist's work (Clausen, 2005: 9). This has created a deeply paradoxical situation for the performance artist, where, despite an outward rejection of any material outcome, performance artists are in fact heavily reliant on documentation to "attain symbolic status within the realm of culture" (Jones in Auslander, 2005: 25). I will explore how artists have attempted to validate their use of documentation through various contrivances in the documentation process, including a focus on 'authenticity' and 'objectivity' (Mangolte, 2005: 36). I will argue that the legacy of performance art's anti-establishment focus has created an inequitable situation, where documentation is seen as 'acceptable' only in the position of 'sidekick' to the live spectacle of the act itself.

Through Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' (1994), the third chapter of this research paper will attempt to reconcile the antagonism between performance art and its documentation. I will argue that the co-dependent relationship, identified in chapters one and two, is untenable in performance art as a necessarily evolving medium. I will argue that the focus on maintaining anti-establishment principles, and thus the 'traditional' relationship between performance art and documentation, is based on an archaic, "anti-Modernist" ideology (Bourriaud, 2002: 13 and McEvilley, 2006: 138). Further, I will posit that 'traditional' performance art, as a kind of "dark alter-ego of Modernism," has ironically entrenched itself within the same dogmatic Modernist theorisation it was seeking to reject (McEvilley, 2006: 138).

This chapter will provide the theoretical foundation for a new breed of performance, one that rejects the notion of the live 'performer' as the sole proprietor of performance art. Through Auslander's hypothesis on 'theatrical' performance, I will argue that performances staged solely for the camera are different from, but not incongruent to, 'traditional' performance art. I will posit that, if the anti-Modernist imperative of a 'live-engagement' with the artist is removed, both forms are commonly focused on the creation of interactivity, and as such, are equally forms of performance art (Bourriaud, 2002: 33).

In order to illustrate and further develop this position, chapters four and five will focus on specific case studies within 'theatrical' performance art. Chapter four will explore the pioneering use of video and photographic documentation by Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman and Yves Klein. Rather than seeing documentation simply as a means to *record* the 'live action,' the performances discussed within this chapter could "neither be conceived nor produced" without the specific technical dispositives of video and photography (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68). Further, any live witness or audience to the act is removed in favour of a privatised engagement with the performance, where the camera becomes a "reified replacement for presence" (Bourriaud, 2002: 75). Completely rejecting the traditional 'sidekick' role of 'objective' documentation, the performances in this chapter are framed as *performance art* by virtue of their re-presentation through video and photography (Auslander, 2005: 26 and Archer, 2002: 101).

Chapter five will explore the work of South African artist, Bridget Baker. Baker's work is particularly interesting within the scope of this essay as her body of work over the last ten years moves swiftly from an early focus on 'traditional' performance art and documentation, to an increasing engagement with 'theatrical' performance. Baker's more recent work in *The Blue Collar Girl* (2005) pushes the relationship between performance art and documentation one step further by removing her own bodily presence from the performances in favour of the position of 'auteur' or 'art-director' (Baker, 2010). The exploration of her work from 'traditional' anti-theatricality to highly produced cinematographic work (crossing into the interdisciplinary genre of 'performed photography') will illustrate further complexities within the discourse on 'theatrical' performance. I will evidence that despite the changing nature of her documentation, Baker's work is commonly focused on the creation of sites for interactivity, and as such can equally be defined as *performance art*. An interview with Baker, in the form of an email exchange between her and myself (December 2010), will provide me with a focused exploration of her work.

The dialogue set up in the preceding chapters will provide a framework for an analysis of my own work in the following chapter. Chapter six will explore my shifting engagement with performance documentation. Following a remarkably similar path to that of Bridget Baker, I have moved from an early engagement with 'traditional' performance art and 'authentic' documentation, to an increasing focus on theatricality and stagedness. I will briefly explore this evolution, and highlight how the definitional problematics identified in the

previous chapters have impacted on my own art practice. Through a new body of work, entitled *Girl, you know it's true*, I will mobilise my research position on performance art as defined, not through the 'live-ness' of the act, but rather, as based on the "sphere of human relations" which they "represent, produce or prompt" (Bourriaud in Smith, 2006: 3).

The body of work encompasses video and photographic documentation, as well as a series of 'performance activations.' Through the performed photographs and videos, I will explore the dilemma of 'authenticity' in the documentation of 'traditional' performance art. By presenting a series of seemingly impossible situations, such as a suicide-by-pencil, I will highlight the misleading premise of documentation, 'authentic' or otherwise, as able to accurately represent "the reality of the performance" (Auslander, 2005: 26). Alongside this, a series of 'performance activations' will attempt to shift the understanding of performance art one step further by creating a series of participatory acts through an encounter between the audience and various textual 'objects.' Rather than dictating an authorial project as a 'performing artist,' the 'performed photographs' and 'performance activations' are engaged in the creation of performances through "interactivity" and performativity<sup>4</sup> (Bourriaud, 2002: 33). This body of work deals directly with the issues explored within this research paper, and argues for a reassessment of the 'traditional' relationship between performance art and performance

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'performativity' was first used by Judith Butler in her paper, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. In reference to linguistics, Butler termed performativity as the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (Butler, 1993). However, the term has since become a "catch-all" phrase within the discourse on performance art to refer to the relationship between the artist and the viewer. Within the scope of this essay, the term 'performativity' will refer to Saltz' definition of 'performativity' as the establishment of a subject to subject relationship between audience and artist, one that is capable of creating exchange or interaction (Goldberg, 2001: 226 and Saltz, 1997: 117-127).

documentation, where the documentation comes to the fore as a 'hero' in its own right.

In the Conclusion, I will consolidate my position that the documentation of performance art is equally able to initiate or act as a site for performance activities. I will briefly evidence that this understanding of performance art and performance documentation has opened up new areas of dynamic interest for the performance artist. Through "New Media," artists are exploring the transmission of performances via digital transmissions, interactive websites and participatory multi-media exploits (Dixon, 2007: 1). As such, documentation – photographs, videos, sound recordings, textual extracts, and so on – is becoming increasingly significant in this "digital age" of interaction (Dixon, 2007: 7). I will conclude that while 'traditional' performance is still active, it is by no means the only 'acceptable' approach to the creation of performance art in the ever-evolving scope of communication possibilities. Further, I will conclude that while 'theatrical' performance has shifted the 'traditional' role of documentation, the initial ideology behind performance art – to provoke and challenge, to undermine its precedents and antecedents – is still very much at the core of the medium in the twenty-first century (Goldberg, 2001: 7).

## Chapter One

### Performance art: The protest hero

Roselee Goldberg states that the common denominator throughout all performance art is its responsiveness to “politically and socially transforming developments” (Goldberg, 2004: 15). Often literally taking to the streets, the medium has become entrenched as a form of protest action, provocatively confronting issues as diverse as feminism, Vietnam, Apartheid and civil rights, to name but a few (Export, 1989: 69 and Goldberg, 2004: 20). This political focus is seemingly inextricable from the ‘live-ness’ of the medium itself. Through its direct engagement with an audience, performance art has the unique ability to elicit powerful, and sometimes aggressive, responses, making it the ideal platform for provocation. This chapter will explore the ‘traditional’ or ‘usual’ understanding of performance art as the ‘protest hero’; a medium deeply rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian politics (Auslander, 2005: 22 and Burnham, 1986: 16).

In November 2010, artists Oleg Vorotnikov and Leonid Nikolayev, from the radical Russian collective, Voina<sup>5</sup>, were arrested for their controversial live act, *Palace Revolution* (Ash, 2010) (see plate 1). The performance saw the artists overturning police vehicles outside Moscow’s police headquarters, protesting against the “all-pervasive corruption that rots the heart of present-day Russia” (Sinyakov, 2010 and Walker, 2011). The radical “Jackass-style<sup>6</sup>”

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<sup>5</sup> Voina is Russian for ‘War’ (Ash, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Jackass’ is an American television series, originally shown on MTV from 2000 to 2002, featuring people performing various dangerous, crude, ridiculous, and self-injuring stunts and pranks (Urban Dictionary, 2011).

action sought to publicly undermine the stronghold of the state's Federal Security Service<sup>7</sup> over the greater populace (Tikhonova, 2011 and Voina, 2010). Alongside the overt political agenda, the public nature of the act set up a direct challenge to what Voina terms "resurgent capitalism" within a "conformist Russian art-market" (Voina, 2010). Activist, Alexei states in this regard:

our actions have political underlying messages, but we use art language only. We speak in images, symbols, which are mostly visual. We don't use the language of political journalism. Politics is just a main theme of our works... an honest artist can't be mute and make glamorous 'masterpieces' for oligarchs, who decorate their 'brilliant' dachas.

(Alexei in Lithgow, 2011)

The arrest of the artists, in true performance art style, has created a celebrity around the group, with anti-arrest demonstrations erupting throughout Russia (Ash, 2011). High-profile peers<sup>8</sup> and critics have lent their support to Voina, calling for "the immediate release of the... activists from pre-trial detention"<sup>9</sup> (FreeVoina, 2010). Advocating the creation of a "sincere and honest and... emotional experience" through the "destruction... of the conformist... art-market," the Voina group have sent a provocative challenge to the dominant

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<sup>7</sup> The Federal Security Service (FSB) was created in 1995 – a successor to Russia's infamous KGB. The FSB is charged with a variety of functions, including counter espionage, defence against terrorism, border control and public monitoring. The agency has been heavily criticised for human rights violations and corruption (Wikipedia, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> British artist, Banksy donated 600 000 roubles toward the bail application (Ash, 2011). Plutser-Sarno stated, "We're very grateful for his support [it] help will attract the attention of the whole world to the personal repression aimed at us, as well as to the greater problem of liquidation of democracy in Russia." (Plutser-Sarno, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Vortnikov and Nikolayev were eventually released on bail on 25 February 2011, the activists stating: "prison has been a most interesting and revealing adventure" (Ash, 2011 and Vortnikov in Ash, 2011).

institutions of cultural and political power in present-day Russia (Tikhonova, 2011 and Voina, 2010). And judging by the heavy-handedness with which they have been dealt, they have clearly been successful.



Plate 1: Voina, *Palace Revolution*, 2010

Voina are part of a long history of artists who have embraced performance art as a means of challenging the dominant hegemonies of their day. This understanding of performance art as a form of “protest action” has become deeply entrenched as the *defining* characteristic of the medium, where performance art is seen as having “ethical faculties,” there “to right the world... to turn humankind from its fearful path” (Tikhonova, 2011 and McEvelley, 2006: 139 and Burnham, 1986: 43).

The legacy of this position can be traced back to two main periods within the history of performance art. Firstly, with the advent of Futurism and Dadaism at the turn of last century (Goldberg, 2001: 110 and Burnham, 1986: 26). And secondly, during the “heyday” of performance art activities in Europe and America during the late 1960s (Goldberg, 2001: 7). Goldberg states that at each point, art-making had reached an impasse, and artists “turned to performance art as a way of breaking down categories and indicating new directions” (Goldberg, 2001: 7).

### **The Origins of Performance Art: Futurism and Dadaism**

Futurism was borne out of a rise of Modernist<sup>10</sup> thinking, and a rejection of the “reflective emphasis of realism and naturalism” that was the preoccupation with the then dominant ‘art academy’ (O’Brien, 1998: 16). Stating that “Italy has been the great market place for old-junk dealers long enough,” the Futurists attempted to usher in a new “cultural self-confidence” by restoring Italian dominance within the international art sphere (Marinetti, 1909 and Ruhrberg, 2005: 84). Influenced by Cubism<sup>11</sup>, the Futurists embraced abstraction within both sculpture and painting, exploring the depiction of noise, confusion, dynamism and motion (Ruhrberg, 2005: 84). Alongside a cultural regeneration, the Futurists wanted to provoke an Italian political

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<sup>10</sup> The Futurists identified a set of characteristics of Modernity to which they became affiliated. Firstly, the right to strike and the related “usurping power of mobs”; secondly, the speed of international communication; and thirdly, a passionate loathing of anything old, including literature, architecture, art and so on (Poggi, 2002: 709 and Marinetti, 1909).

<sup>11</sup> Cubism, or ‘Classical Modern Art’ refers to the early exploration of abstraction of form by artists such as Picasso, Gauguin and Matisse, to name but a few. The movement rejected the *tromp l’oeil* of traditional painting in favour of a destruction of form, where “reason and design” predominated (Ruhrberg, 2005: 67).

revolution. Aligned with Fascism<sup>12</sup>, the movement propounded the necessities of conflict as a means to stimulate change (Ruhrberg, 2005: 84). With the publication of their first Manifesto in the newspaper, *Le Figaro* (1909), lead provocateur, Filippo Marinetti called for the “glorification of war, militarism and patriotism...[and] the celebration of courage, audacity and revolt” (Poggi, 2002: 709).

As a means to ‘activate’ the Futurist revolution, live performance was identified as the ideal platform to “galvanize the masses<sup>13</sup>” (Poggi, 2002: 709). As such, the crowd, or *la folla*, would become the “locus of [Futurism’s] political and cultural aspirations” and the live Futurist *serata*, or ‘evenings’, would “occupy a central place” within the Futurists’ “pervasive effort[s] to both shape and merge” the “Italian people” (Poggi, 2002: 709-711).

At the first of the *Futurist Evenings* (1910), a live event held in Trieste<sup>14</sup>, Marinetti used the platform to inflame the public, calling for them to destroy the “cult” of traditional art, to “set fire to the library shelves... and flood the museums” (Marinetti, 1909: 9). Attempting to jolt the public out of their “stasis and complacency,” the performance largely consisted of Marinetti haranguing and insulting the audience (Poggi, 2002: 740). The spectacle, not-surprisingly, caused a riot. However, the boing and rioting heralded a triumphant

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<sup>12</sup> Italian Fascism, under Benito Mussolini, is associated with the support of the restoration of Italian territories and colonies to the Italian nation. Briefly described, the movement was a “doctrine of bourgeois resurgence whose essence was antiliberalism and antisocialism... the core of its ideology being [radical] nationalism” (De Grand, 2000: xiv)

<sup>13</sup> Poggi states that the Futurist concept of the ‘masses’ is deeply problematic in that it creates a mythical ‘other,’ one that insists on the generalised characterisation of “the people” (Poggi, 2002). This concept will be dealt with further in chapter three.

<sup>14</sup> Trieste was a venue of great symbolic significance, being the pivotal border city in the Austro-Italian conflict of the turn of last century (Goldberg, 2001: 13).

performance<sup>15</sup> where, according to Marinetti, applause would have “merely indicated something mediocre, dull [or] regurgitated” (Marinetti in Goldberg, 2001: 12). Seeking “a dissolution of the traditional barriers between performers and spectators,” the Futurists used the live spectacle as a means to incite the *la folla*, implicating the ‘crowd’ “as agents for political revolt” (Poggi, 2002: 711).

Alongside Futurism, Dadaism emerged in Switzerland, with an equally provocative and inflammatory programme. The Dada rebellion directly coincided with the advent of the First World War, raging against its conservative nationalist and colonialist agendas (Walther, 2005: 89). While the Futurists extolled the virtues of nationalism, war and modern life, the Dadaists conversely sought to question this faith in ‘progress’ through their ostensibly “irrational” acts (Walther, 2005: 89 and Bowler, 1991). Despite the incompatible agendas, through “retooling” the Futurist techniques, the Dadaists saw the possibilities of live performance as a means to challenge a complacent public, in this case directing their attention to the “idiocy” of the war<sup>16</sup> and the “civilization that produced it” (Gordon, 1974: 114 and Walther, 2005: 119). The Dadaists introduced the use of “pure onomatopoeiac or vowel sound and abstract movement, improvisation [and] simultaneous and illogical actions” as a means to ‘articulate’ their belief in the “insanity of an unquestioning faith in progress” (Ruhrberg, 2005: 84 and Gordon, 1974: 114).

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<sup>15</sup> The performance was of such a provocative nature, that following the first *serata*, the Austrian consulate made an official complaint to the Italian government, with the result that the future actions of the ‘troublemakers’ of the art-world were carefully scrutinised by state and security officials (Goldberg, 2001: 13).

<sup>16</sup> World War I erupted in 1914 and saw the downfall of the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires (Walther, 2005: 89).

Goldberg describes one of the Dadaist performances at the *Palais des Fêtes* in Paris (1920):

Tzara read a 'vulgar' newspaper article prefaced by an announcement that it was a 'poem' and accompanied by an inferno of bells and rattles... masked figures recited a disjointed poem by Breton, and then Picabia executed large drawings in chalk on a blackboard, wiping out each section before going to the next.

(Goldberg, 2001, 75)

The erasing of the drawings by Picabia indicated a calculated "destruction" of the supposed "high civilizational value" of recognised "works of art" (McEvelley, 2006: 138). These "anti-art"<sup>17</sup> actions led to the matinee ending, typically, in an uproar, signalling success for the provocative performers (McEvelley, 2006: 138 and Goldberg, 2001, 75). As with the Futurists, the metaphorical and literal "assault on the spectator" became an integral component to the Dadaist creation of the 'live spectacle' (Gordon, 1974: 114).

According to McEvelley, the Dadaist and Futurist model created three very specific "hints" for later generations of performance artists (McEvelley, 2006:137). Firstly, the "return of art to the everyday world"; secondly, the "incorporation of chance procedures into art-making"; and thirdly, the designation of "previously non-art... as art" (McEvelley, 2006:137). These

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<sup>17</sup> McEvelley defines the term 'anti-art' simply as a destruction or aggressive rejection of "recognised works of art, and [their] supposed high civilizational value" (McEvelley, 1006: 138).

aspects of the groups' "experiments" would become the starting point for the hard-line performance activities of the late 1960s, activities which would come to concretise the 'traditional' or 'usual' understanding of performance art (Goldberg, 2001: 75 and McEvilley, 2006: 138).

### **Performance Art: The 1960s**

The late 1960s in Europe and America saw an unprecedented amplification of performance art by the artists of the generation. For the first time, performance art was seen as "a medium of expression in its own right" (Goldberg 2004: 15). According to Goldberg, the period sparked with unrest in response to the explosive issues of "Vietnam, Civil Rights, the Cold War, the atom bomb, feminism and sexual emancipation," to name but a few (Goldberg 2004: 20). In the urgent call for social and political reform, performance art became "the most tangible art form of the period" (Goldberg, 2001:7). Building on the Futurist and Dadaist 'prototype,' performance art was identified as the ideal "weapon" in the face of the political crises of the generation (Sandler, 1980: 345).

The rise of interest in performance art during the 1960s can largely be attributed to a violent reaction against the prevailing dominance of 'High' Modernism (McEvilley, 2006: 138). While the Dadaists and Futurists had belonged to an earlier, more permissive period of Modernism, the second wave of 'High' Modernism adopted an increasingly hostile attitude toward

‘Low-art’<sup>18</sup>, popular culture and any overtly political art making (O’Brien, 1998: 16 and Sandler, 1980: 345). An important distinction can thus be drawn between these two ‘Modernisms.’ Sandler differentiates between “inclusive” and “exclusive” Modernism (Sandler, 1980: 345): the former, also referred to as Avantgardism, allowed for “progressive” tendencies; the latter focused on a “purist” form of art production (O’Brien, 1998: 16 and Sandler, 1980: 345).

‘High’ Modernism was characterised by painting and, in particular, Abstract Expressionism<sup>19</sup>, a movement that has become largely emblematic of the term ‘Modernism’ (McEvelley, 2006: 138). According to Rubin, the “hearty reaffirmation of pure painting” during the 1950s and early 1960s was largely a result of the cataclysmic devastation of World War II (Rubin in McEvelley, 2006: 134). In the post-war pessimism, audiences and critics were “eager for the healing and civilizing powers of the visual arts” (Rubin in McEvelley, 2006: 134). Shape and colour were considered beyond “intellectual doubts or moral hesitations,” as such, the only legitimate aesthetic aspects in the creation or “judgment” of visual arts (McEvelley, 2006: 131). Artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, abandoned any “extra-aesthetic feelings” (pity, rage and so forth) in favour of formalism as an “autonomous” and objective means of representation (McEvelley, 2006: 131). McEvelley sites a popular epigram of the era in this regard: “Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shades and Reinhardt turned out the light” – the Modernist painters literally

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<sup>18</sup> The terms ‘Low’ and ‘High’ art were popularised by Modernist critic Clement Greenberg’s writings on Abstract Expressionism, most notably in his essay *Avant Garde and Kitsch* (1939) (Greenberg, 1988). ‘High’ art refers to art whose content is in the meaning of the art itself, most notably, abstraction. ‘Low’ art refers generally to popular or commercial art, including items that are mass-produced, or ‘kitsch’ (Greenberg, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Abstract Expressionism refers to a type of abstract painting with a focus on spontaneity, where the action of the artist and his gestures are key to the creation of the work (Archer, 2002: 33).

and metaphorically closed the door “on the painfully disappointing world out there” (McEvelley, 2006: 133).

However, during the late 1960’s climate of unrest, the pendulum would once again swing. To the artist-activists of the generation, the “internally self-defining and self-referring” attitude of the Modernist “author”<sup>20</sup> was deemed deeply dismissive (Taylor, 2005: 10). The “divorce between art and life, between the museum and the everyday world” seemed “complicit with unhealthy political tendencies” (McEvelley, 2006: 138).

By embracing political themes, performance art thus set up a direct challenge to the avoidant “self-referentialism” of the Modernist canon (Taylor, 2005: 10). Seeing themselves as selfless, rather than self-seeking, performance artists attempted to merge art with the harsh realities of everyday life (Taylor, 2005: 10). British artist, Stuart Brisely, underwent extreme trials of endurance, questioning social institutions and ways of resisting their dominance (Archer, 2002: 105). Russian, Zdeněk Beran, burnt the entire contents of his studio, fighting against the “institutional authority... and political censorship” of the Russian government (Taylor, 2005: 54). Czech artist, Thomas Ruller, set himself on fire, protesting against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (Goldberg, 2005: 56). Yoko Ono, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Yvonne Rainera and Alistair Maclennan, to name but a few, embraced live performance, “irrevocably disrupting the course of traditional history” (Goldberg 2004: 15).

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault refers to this second wave Modernism as the “classical age” where “authorship becomes central to the ‘authenticity’ of the work and writers incur[red] the obligation to become authors, to discover... the distinctive repertoire which genius creates and others must imitate” (Foucault in Rajchman, 1983: 42).

As a further challenge to Modernism, there was a call to “question and challenge the commodity value of art and objects in the hands of patrons, collectors and museums” (Goldberg, 2004: 16). While the Futurists and Dadaists had made no separation between sculpture, painting and performance, seeking rather to “launch assaults... on the artistic battle” no matter what the mode of representation, performance art of this later generation reviled the associated Capitalisms of the ‘art-object’ (Goldberg, 2004: 16 and McEvilley, 2006: 138). Viewing their art-making as a set of actions, a non-marketable “labour of the artist,” artists placed a virtual moratorium on both painting and gallery institutions, rejecting the innate “commercial entanglement” of the ‘establishment’ in favour of the democracy of a live, public spectacle<sup>21</sup> (Taylor, 2005: 22).

The physical involvement of the audience became integral to the creation of this democratic practice (Goldberg, 2001:14). While Modernist painting insisted that the work be viewed in silence, “with the eyes alone, against a neutral white gallery wall,” performance artists during this period focused on increasing the responsibility of the audience by using them as equal players in the greater spectacle (Taylor, 2005: 10 and Drucker, 1993: 54). Performance artist Carolee Schneeman explains that, compared to other art forms, “performance is necessarily more aggressive and immediate in its effect – it’s projective” (Schneeman in Taylor, 2005: 37). Thus the audience is *forced* to engage; to be more physically active. Raging against the disenfranchised

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Kaprow was instrumental in leading the ‘war’ against “museal culture” (Joseph, 1997: 59). Kaprow deemed the museum and gallery establishments as deeply repressive, and advocated a “relocation of art beyond the confines of the institution, [where] it could exist in the marginal zones along roadways or on the outskirts of the city” (Joseph, 1997: 59).

position of the Modernist 'observer,' performance art inculcated the viewer in a new relationship – that of the 'witness' to the live act (Taylor, 2005: 23). The experience of 'being there,' of "being affected, effected, bored, enthralled, irritated, inspired" is thus intrinsically linked, not only to performance art's political ends (as Futurism would have it), but also within this later generation as "an integral component to performance art as an interactional accomplishment" (Bauman in Auslander 2005: 27).

Performance art, alongside conceptual art, thus attempted to "redirect art's impact on society" (McEvelley, 2006: 134). Rejecting the transcendentalism of 'High' Modernism, abstract art would be "forced to give way to anti-Modernist immanence," where the conservative and capitalistic bent of abstract painting would be opposed by "anarchism, socialist deconstruction, and a variety of revolutionary sentiments" (McEvelley, 2006: 134 and 138).

Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964) (see plate 2) has been described by Goldberg as her "major opus," and in many ways exemplifies performance art's challenge to Modernism: that "art need no longer be a durable commodity... witnessed in reverential silence" (Taylor, 2005: 22). Dealing directly with issues surrounding the emancipation of the female body, *Meat Joy* was first performed on 25 May 1964 at Jean-Jacques Lebel's *First Festival of Free Expression* at the American Center in Paris. Through it, Schneeman attempted to redress the imbalance created by a "masculist art history [that was] obsessed with the female nude" (Schneeman, 1991: 31). The performance was a seventy-minute spectacle in which male and female

performers, partially clad in fur underwear, painted each other's bodies, embraced, crawled through paper and threw "red meat, fish, and dead chickens into the mix of hair, paint, bodies and mattresses" (Goldberg, 2004: 44). The performance was of such a provocative nature that one member of the audience attempted to "strangle" Schneeman before being dragged off by other participants (Schneeman, 1991: 31). Police were present at the event, waiting to arrest the naked "male and female performers" for any infringement of the French moral-decency laws (Schneeman, 1991: 29). However, like the Futurists before (with their manifesto on *The Pleasures of Being Booed*), the extreme controversy around the performance, rather than being a setback, indicated that as a form of protest action it was in fact highly successful in disrupting the conservative status quo<sup>22</sup> (Goldberg, 2001: 16). The attempts at suppressing "publicity and controversy itself" doing little more than drawing attention to the aims and agendas of Schneeman as a political activist (Schneeman, 1991: 33).

According to Taylor, *Meat Joy* typifies the paradigms inherent in the performance art of the era, namely "chance, randomness, unrepeatability, and a carefully calibrated disregard for the sensitivities of taste" (Taylor, 2005: 22). Rather than focusing on the creation of a "purist" material outcome, the event provided a provocative "multi-sensory situation" for the audience (Drucker, 1993: 54).

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<sup>22</sup> According to Schneeman, "plants" or police provocateurs frequently sabotaged and disrupted the live-actions during the 1960s and 1970s (Schneeman, 1991: 33). Various associations responsible for the arts and the government institutions that supported them were likewise complicit in the overt and covert censorship and suppression of performance art (Schneeman, 1991: 33).



Plate 2: Carolee Schneeman, *Meat Joy*, 1964

McEvilley states that denunciation of art by “anti-art,” by painting through “anti-painting,” resulted in artists from the Kaprow/Schneeman generation positioning themselves as a “kind of dark alter ego of Modernism,” with many of the same characteristics, but with a “reversed hierarchy” (McEvilley, 2006: 138). With a focus on the prefix ‘anti,’ performance art developed an “anti-purist, anti-puritanical, anti-Minimalist, anti-reductivist, anti-formalist, anti-austere, anti-bare, anti-boring, anti-empty, anti-flat, anti-machine-made... anti-dogmatic, anti-exclusivist...” focus (Kozloff in Sandler, 1980: 346). Rather than creating an “instead of” or “in exchange for,” performance art

consequently defined itself by negation, and specifically the negation of Modernism (McEvelley, 2006: 138).

### **'Traditional' Performance Art**

McEvelley thus describes the development of performance art as part of a three-limbed Hegelian syllogism<sup>23</sup>. The first limb being focused on Modernism and the “aesthetic statement” (McEvelley, 2006: 134). The second limb being a reaction to the first, anti-Modernism (McEvelley, 2006: 134). The third limb, post-Modernism, allowing for a “resolution of oppositions... that becomes the first step of a new syllogism” (McEvelley, 2006: 134). While conceptual art would move into the third limb, performance art’s “anti-art” focus ideologically ensnared itself within the second limb (McEvelley, 2006: 134). Rejecting Post-Modernism<sup>24</sup> for its flippant disregard for the altruistic intents of the performance artist as a political activist, performance art has thus manifested itself as vehemently anti-Modernist (Burnham, 1986: 44). The ‘live-ness’ of the ‘act,’ the “collaborative participation of the audience,” and the rejection of the ‘art-object’ as part of this anti-Modernism have become entrenched as the ‘traditional’ or ‘usual’ understanding of the medium (Auslander, 2005: 27).

Exploring several definitions of performance art from contemporary artists and writers, McEvelley’s syllogistic hypothesis becomes clearly evident. Peggy

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<sup>23</sup> Hegel’s syllogism refers to a form of deductive reasoning which consists of three terms: Individual, Universal and Particular. The first two being premises, the last being the conclusion. (Encyclopaedia of Marxism, 2010)

<sup>24</sup> Postmodernism roughly began in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists began to draw reference from a “multiplicity of attitudes and approaches...[they] could equally well adopt craft and other ‘low’ cultural techniques, materials and subject matters where appropriate” (Archer, 2002: 101). A postmodern culture was one of quotation – “copying, pastiche, ironic reference [and] imitation” (Archer, 2002: 144).

Phelan states that “performance’s only life is in the present... it cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulations of representations of representations, once it does it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan, 1993: 146). Peter Richards describes performance art as “a type of art practice that features a live exchange between the artist and the viewer” (Richards, 2005: 65). Artist Ishmael Houston-Jones states that “performance art [is] a way to equalize the power relationship between audience and the performer.... [Performance art] should be accessible and open for most people... to remind the audience that they are watching a performance made by a human being” (Houston-Jones in Robinson, 1993: 31). Goldberg defines performance art simply as “live art by artists” (Goldberg, 2001: 9). The common thread throughout these definitions, in line with Auslander’s understanding of ‘traditional’ performance art, is that the performances are available to an audience solely through the direct interaction between the artist and the audience, where it is the ‘live-ness’ of the performance that defines it as such (Auslander, 2005: 28).

Returning to Voina, the group’s performance actions plot a clear, uncompromising trajectory between the radical anti-modernisms of preceding generations to the ‘traditional’ understanding of performance art within a contemporary context. Their manifesto states:

our art is a free non-whoring art... it is our gift to the world and to each and every person. [If] our actions make you feel joy or, on the contrary, provoke deep gloomy meditations, then we

become happy. Our art touches people. And no one dares fix a price to it. You can't love for money, you can't bear a child for money and you can't make art for money — otherwise it's not art. It's a matter of principle and we will always stand by this. To sell art, to value it in terms of money prizes and award statuettes, means to display stereotyped thinking, to equate art with plaster, to murder it....

(Kozlenok, 2010)

Through their puristic (or as one critic has it, “bombastic”) approach to performance, Voina exemplify the continued legacy of performance art's anti-capitalist, anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian focus (Tikhonova, 2011). As such, the ‘traditional’ understanding of performance art seems to fit purely within a rejection of the Modernist framework, where performance art is ‘required’ to reject both the art-object and the gallery institution in favour of the “*experience* of time, space and material” (Goldberg, 2001: 153).

While it would be disingenuous to assert that *all* performance art has such an aggressively puritanical focus,<sup>25</sup> the syllogistic anti-Modernist limb in which performance art has seemingly entrenched itself has created a very specific, and obdurate, set of requirements – or perhaps more specifically, a set of (non)requirements – for the performance artist to uphold in order to avoid criticism (Erickson, 1999: 99). Linda Frye Burnham, who founded the first magazine devoted entirely to live performance in the visual arts in 1978

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<sup>25</sup> I will explore the work of Joan Jonas and Bruce Nauman in chapter four in this regard.

(entitled *High Performance*), explains that performance art is thus often criticised as “no good” or “not performance art” because it “lacks elements of anti-establishment rebellion... or that it is designed so that it may be performed more than once... and so on” (Burnham, 1986: 15). The uncompromising, hard-line position of ‘traditional’ performance art has created a “series of contradictions... and blind spots” for the performance artist (Clausen, 2005: 223).

The following chapter will explore how performance art as the ‘protest hero’ has led directly to a highly problematic and paradoxical relationship between performance art and its documentation.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Performance art: The dilemma of documentation**

Chapter one explored the ideological character of performance art as the 'protest hero.' As evidenced, this anarchic spirit was intrinsically linked to the 'live-ness' of the medium. As such, performance art had the unique ability to affect an audience, and at the same time send a provocative "fuck-you" to the gallery establishment and the commodification of the art-object (Burden in Burnham, 1986: 51). These characteristics have become entrenched as seemingly 'necessary requirements' in defining performance art (Erickson, 1999: 99 and Burnham, 1986: 15). Despite these imperatives, artists, critics and historians recognise the need to preserve performances beyond the moment of their performative manifestation. Documentation allows the work to be seen by a broader audience, and also to become a record to influence the art-historical reception of the artist's work (Goldberg, 2004: 31). However, herein lies a deep-rooted antagonism. Documentation implies that an audience can access a performance through secondary means, undermining the significance of both the 'live-ness', and the interaction between artist and 'performer'. Further, any form of documentation – be it photographic, text or video – leads to the creation of a commodifiable 'art-object', which performance art inherently rejects.

This chapter will explore performance documentation, both as a necessity and as a highly ironic predicament for the performance artist. I will examine ways in which performance artists and documentarists have attempted to reconcile

these seemingly incompatible endeavours through ‘authenticity’ and ‘objectivity.’ I will conclude that performance documentation, in order to be ‘acceptable,’ has been ‘traditionally’ relegated to the role of hangdog ‘sidekick’ to performance art as a live spectacle.

As evidenced in chapter one, performance art ‘traditionally’ relies on a live-engagement with an audience, where the “virtue of performance art [lies] in its immediacy” (MoCP, 2010). Despite this focus, Goldberg points out that, in reality, a far greater number of people will be able to access a photograph or read a description of a performance than experience it live (Goldberg, 2004: 34). Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist is Present* at MoMA (2010), saw thousands of visitors witnessing her physical *presence*, but over 800 000 people were able to access the performance via streaming video (Cotter, 2010). Many of the examples discussed within this research paper have been accessed through stills or videos of the original performances, or have been cited from writers and critics in a similar position<sup>26</sup>. The fact that so many performances are so well documented, and the documents carefully preserved, points to an awareness, on the part of the artist and critic, of the ‘value’ of documentation. While the title of Abramovic’s performance calls, literally, for the artists’ *presence*, and thus a live, experiential performance in the most ‘traditional’ sense, the use of the video documentation ironically belies this statement. Claudine Isé biting comments on this paradox, “I can’t quite work out what the Marina-cam adds other than to... amplify the spectacle via its broadcast to anonymous thousands” (Isé, 2010). What it

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<sup>26</sup> This in itself is a contentious issue: Jon Erickson states that the presentation of the history of performance via photographs is a “deeply ironic” gaffe on the part of the critic (Erickson, 1999: 98-99).

does indicate, however, is the awareness on the part of the artist of their “dependence on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture” (Jones in Auslander, 2005: 25).

Within this “mutual dependency” lies the ‘crux’ of a deeply problematic relationship between performance art and its documentation (Clausen, 2005: 9). Without documentation, live performances seem “destined to oblivion” (Mangolte, 2005: 36). Many performances are *fringe* in nature, witnessed, more often than not, by a few friends and other performance artists on a single night (Clausen, 2005: 9). Documentarist, Babette Mangolte, recalls watching Richard Foreman’s performance, *Total Recall* (1970), where there were only five spectators present at the event, including herself (Mangolte, 2005: 35). For Mangolte, creating a record of the spectacle was an absolute necessity: “somebody had to preserve for posterity some traces of the extraordinary originality of the... production” (Mangolte, 2005: 35). However, documentation seems deeply “incompatible... to the temporal, action based” nature of performance art (Kaprow in MoCP, 2010). By using documentation, the performance is relegated to a “re-presentation” through a still image or mediated video, negating the importance of the *live encounter* with an audience (Clausen, 2005: 9). Further, performance art runs the risk of duplicitously engaging with the same “capitalist appropriation” it was raging against, where the material trappings of documentation – as texts, photographs, notices, diagrams, etc. – become easy formats for “commercial transactions” (Taylor, 2005: 43). Burnham states in this regard that

“documentation of the events is antithetical to the ideal... almost a violation” of performance art’s anti-establishment roots (Burnham, 1986: 15).

Yves Klein’s *Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity Zone 5* (1962) clearly illustrates this dilemma (see plate 3). For the performance, Klein offered to publicly sell his own “immaterial pictorial sensitivity... to any person willing to purchase such an extraordinary, if intangible, commodity” (Goldberg, 2001: 146). He conducted seven sales in total on the banks of the River Seine – the purchaser paid Klein in gold leaf and received a receipt in return. Klein insisted that after the transaction all records be destroyed: in a grand gesture he threw the gold leaf into the river and requested the purchaser burn the receipt (Denys, 2010). In keeping with the ‘traditional’ values of performance art, Klein sought to reveal the process of his art by making it public, and most importantly, to prevent it from becoming a commodifiable relic in a gallery or museum (Goldberg, 2001: 146). However, despite burning records of the transactions, the performance was documented photographically and has since become an iconic image in the history of performance art, the very ‘relic’ he was raging against.

*The Artist is Present* and *Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity Zone 5* are but two examples of the generally problematic relationship between performance art and its documentation. At face value, both performances appear to be focused on a live audience engagement and a rejection of the art-object in the true sense of ‘traditional’ performance art as the ‘protest hero.’ However, there is a disconnect. The documentation ironically indicates a completely opposing

set of values. For Abramovic, the importance of the artists' physical *presence* is undermined through her use of documentation. For Klein, the 'token' burning of the documentation, and then creating a different set of evidence through photographic documentation, seems deeply incongruous. This holds true for most 'traditional' performance art and its documentation.

Despite the incongruity, very few artists have resisted the urge to create some form of record of their performance activities, where their "survival and fame depends upon documentation" (Erickson, 1999: 99). Clausen states that this mutual dependency between performance art and documentation can be seen as a *failure* in terms of the initial ideology behind performance art, where performance art was "a projection surface for utopian and authentic desires" (Clausen, 2005: 9). For the egalitarian 'protest-hero,' the subjugation of performance art's ideological roots, through its reliance on documentation, is deeply paradoxical (Taylor, 2005: 43).



Plate 3: Yves Klein, *Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity Zone 5*, 1962

## **'Authenticity' in Documentation**

In order to try and reconcile the practical necessities of documentation, with the requirements of 'live-ness' and 'non-commodification,' artists and documentarists have attempted various contrivances within the documentation process. Philip Auslander terms this style of performance documentation as 'documentary' (Auslander, 2005: 28). Within this category, the relationship between performance art and its documentation is to be understood as 'usual,' with the "event preceding and authorizing its documentation" (Auslander, 2005: 22). Documenting the performance from the viewpoint of the spectator, framing a sense of the context, and capturing an image that would "become what an audience would likely remember of the piece" characterise 'documentary' style documentation (Mangolte, 2005: 40). The focus of this documentation is thus not on trying to create a 'good photo,' but rather on capturing the interactional accomplishment as a whole, where the documentation becomes a reminder of "context, space, actions and ideas" (Erickson, 1999: 98). According to Taylor, these contrivances have encouraged the conclusion that performance documentation should be "homemade hit-or-miss amateurish" in order to be considered 'authentic' (Taylor, 2005: 223).

The documentation of Voina's *Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear!* (2008) articulates this focus (see plate 4 and 5). The performance took place at the Moscow's *Timiryazev State Biology Museum* on 29 February 2008, two days prior to the presidential elections in Russia. Twenty Voina activists assembled in the

museum hall of "Metabolism and Energy of Organisms" (LiveLeak, 2010). After stripping naked, the group proceeded to have sexual intercourse. Voina activist, Plucer-Sarno, describes the action: "this is a portrait of pre-election Russia: everybody fucks each other, and the puppy bear looks at that with an unconcealed scorn" (LiveLeak, 2010). 'Puppy bear' is a direct reference to Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev – the etymology of his surname meaning "bear" in Russian (Voina and LiveLeak, 2010). The "fuck action" was documented via video camera (Voina, 2010). The picture quality is poor: the low-resolution video swings wildly between the performers, going in and out of focus (LiveLeak, 2010). The impression created is that the performance just 'happened' to be caught on camera by a spectator. However, the group in fact invited a crew to document the act (Wikipedia, 2010). The use and dissemination of 'low-quality' footage appears to be a deliberate machination on the part of the artists. Through self-consciously confining itself to low budget production, shooting and editing techniques, this 'documentary' style contrives the impression of indifference towards the documentation of the performance act (Mangolte, 2005: 44). Despite the irony of Voina's manifesto statement that "there is no product to our art, it is not aimed at creating a product and evaluating it," their documentation seems 'acceptable' in its poor quality production (Voina, 2010). In order for the documentation to be an 'authentic' piece of performance documentation, it seems it is required to observe its position as *sidekick*, or addendum, to performance art as a live spectacle.



Plate 4: Voina, *Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear!*, 2008 (screen shot)



Plate 5: Voina, *Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear!*, 2008 (screen shot)

Paging through Goldberg's full-colour, glossy *Performance, Live Art Since the 60s*, it becomes clear just how deeply entrenched the focus on 'documentary' style recordings is. By far, the majority of images are grainy, black-and-white stills, despite the fact that many of them were taken in the 90s where a digital camera could just have easily taken a crisp, colour image. Erickson writes that black-and-white documentation is seen by many as the only tenable way to document a performance as "there is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white," which points to the idea that documentation is only a "supplement to a performance" (Erickson in Auslander, 2005: 22). As such, many of the images are indistinguishable in terms of their chronology because of contriving the effect of early low-grade film techniques (Mangolte, 2005:44). By engineering specific semiotic features of 'documentary' footage, the documentation thus attempts to be read as 'authentic,' a "producer of reality" (Eco, 1977: 216). However, these attempts at 'non-aestheticisation' – the awkward angles, eye-level shots and grainy footage – are in their own way deeply aestheticised (Mangolte, 2005:44). Jones describes this as a creation of a "mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence or originary perception" (Jones in Poschl, 2005: 79). The focus then on 'documentary' style documentation is "not the performance work as a thing in itself... not its meaning or emotion" but on 'capturing' "the experience of viewing it" (Lambert-Beatty, 2005: 114).

Artists who have embraced documentation in any (explicitly) aesthetic and thus 'non-authentic' way, have come under fire for contradicting "the very reason for live-art in the first place" (Erickson, 1999: 100). Matthew Barney's retrospective at the Guggenheim (2003) has been the target of such

condemnation. Mangolte states that Barney misses the point of performance art where, through his documentation, he removes any sense of the performance context in favour of creating an “art-logo” for display in a gallery (Mangolte, 2005: 44). Rejecting any sense of ‘authenticity,’ Barney is unafraid to “borrow Tinseltown’s props or Silicon Valley’s computing power” in the creation of highly polished documents (Shreve, 2004: 125). However, according to Mangolte, this focus on aestheticisation results in “slickness instead of authenticity,” where the documentation is removed from any ‘authentic’ representation of “spatial perception” (Mangolte, 2005: 48 and Goldberg, 2001: 223). For many ‘traditionalist’ critics and performance artists, this form of documentation, with its hyper-real construction, and its sole intention for exhibition, has “defiled” performance art to such an extent as to declare it dead (Burnham, 1986: 15). According to Burnham, the generation of performance artists that have lost touch with their audience have sent a violent “slap in the face” to the “original vanguard of... performance art” (Burnham, 1986: 44).

The ‘crux’ of the contentions between performance art and its documentation lies in the vehement anti-establishment principles of performance art’s origins. These staunchly political roots seem to have set the medium up for failure and criticism (Clausen, 2005: 9). By its very premise, ‘traditional’ performance art rejects any form of ‘product’ in favour of the live-act. However, it is deeply dependent on these same ‘products’ for its success and notoriety. While *Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear!* had but a handful of viewers on the occasion of the act, the video documentation has been watched by over 90 000 viewers, as of

March 2011. This reveals the deeply skewed sense of importance of the 'liveness' of performance art versus the documentation as a mere "supplement to act" (Erickson, 1999: 99). Borčić comments in this regard that the artists' utopian efforts to avoid "the functions of the system of art and market mechanisms is an objective condemned to failure, and which in retrospect appears only as a short-term naïve belief" (Borčić, 2010: 2).

Despite this 'failure,' the hierarchical hero:sidekick relationship between performance art and performance documentation still seems entrenched within a contemporary context. To borrow a metaphor from Bourriaud, this has resulted in the vehement performance 'traditionalists' – usually the critics – patrolling like a scout troop, monitoring performance art and documentation, ready to quickly condemn it for being 'inauthentic' or 'not performance art' (Bourriaud, 2009: 13 and Burnham, 1986: 15).

In the following chapter, I will argue that the focus on maintaining anti-establishment principles, and thus the 'traditional' relationship between performance art and documentation, has resulted in an art form that is unyielding and rigid in its premise (Bourriaud, 2002: 13). Further, I will posit that this relationship has ironically entrenched it within the same archaic, unbending Modernist framework it was seeking to reject. Through Auslander's hypothesis on "theatrical performance," I will argue for a new 'species' of performance art, one that embraces documentation and aestheticisation, where documentation comes to the fore as a 'hero' in its own right.

## Chapter Three

### Performance documentation: From sidekick to hero

As evidenced in the previous chapter, the stronghold of 'traditional' performance art has resulted in a deeply antagonistic relationship between performance art and its documentation. Performance art is considered, by the performance traditionalist, to be "authentic" *only* when it maintains a focus on "live-ness" and anti-establishment principles (Burnham, 1986: 15). However, for an art form that is described by Goldberg as the "avant avant garde," it seems to have become acutely rigid and mulish (Goldberg, 2001: 9).

This chapter will argue for a re-evaluation of the relationship between performance art and performance documentation. I will posit that 'traditional' performance art, as directly anti-Modernist, has ironically entrenched itself within the same set of authorial and dogmatic principles it was seeking to reject (Bourriaud, 2002: 13). Through Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' (1994) and Philip Auslander's theory on 'theatrical' performance (2005), I will argue for a new breed of performance art, one that rejects the 'traditional' relationship between performance art and documentation, where documentation comes to the fore as a legitimate species of performance art in its own right.

According to Clausen, the "fence building" around 'authentic' performance art by critics has led to an almost impossible set of criteria in terms of defining performance art as such (Clausen, 2005: 7). Even artists who have refused

documentation have come under fire from the performance art 'guard' for not maintaining anti-establishment values. Performance artist Tino Sehgal has steadfastly refused to allow any documentation of his performances (MoCP, 2010). His work focuses on creating experiences for the viewer, in the true sense of 'traditional' performance art, by relying "exclusively on the human voice, bodily movement, and social interaction" between the performer/s and the audience (Guggenheim, 2010). However, even Sehgal has been criticised by the obdurate performance 'traditionalist.' Ben Davis points out that while Sehgal may not be reliant on photographic documentation, he is reliant on the gallery and museum institution for the dissemination of his work (Davis, 2010). Further, all of Sehgal's work is saleable – his work *Kiss* was recently purchased by MoMA for \$70 000. Critic, Perreault writes, "Sehgal can purge art of materiality and paperwork, but not of cold, hard cash" (Perreault, 2010). The criticism of Sehgal for not maintaining anti-establishment and anti-commodification principles indicates that, despite the artist's unique agenda, critics are ready at the wings to criticise the 'performance' for being 'inauthentic.'

However, why should Sehgal, an artist working in contemporary gallery spaces, still come under fire for not maintaining anti-establishment and anti-commodification principles? To return to *The Artist is Present* – why should Abramovic be criticised for disseminating her work to a wider audience via the Internet? And equally, why should Barney be condemned for an aesthetic focus in his documentation and performance process?

According to Bourriaud these sorts of problematics have arisen because the “overwhelming majority of critics and philosophers are reluctant to come to grips with contemporary practices” (Bourriaud, 2002: 7). As such, the work, its relevance and originality are analysed on the “basis of problems either solved or unresolved by previous generations” (Bourriaud, 2002: 7). The dogmatic socio-political stance of artists from the Kaprow/Schneeman generation has created a deeply problematic “puritanical,” and archaic ‘benchmark’ for critically assessing performance art (Burnham, 1986: 45 and McEvilley, 2006: 138).

In his novel, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Tom Robbins wittily comments on the creation of dogma that “the problem starts not with the originator or developer of the idea, but with the people who are attracted to it, who adopt it, who cling to it until their last nail breaks and who invariably lack the overview, flexibility, imagination and most importantly, sense of humour, to maintain it in the spirit it was hatched” (Robbins, 1980: 85). And indeed, performance art fundamentalists seem to have ‘forgotten’ that ‘traditional’ performance originated in response to a specific set of crises; crises that have long since shifted and changed (Bourriaud, 2002: 11). This seems largely counterintuitive: the medium is propagating what is wrong with the ‘world’, or perhaps more specifically what was wrong with the ‘world’ in the 1960s. According to Bourriaud, the continual insistence of what constitutes ‘authentic’ performance stems directly from a teleological reading of Modernism, with artists and critics disregarding the social and societal evolutions around them (Bourriaud, 2002: 11). Bourriaud comments that, counter to the anti-Modernist

position of performance art, it is not modernism that is dead, but rather “the idealistic and teleological version” (Bourriaud, 2002: 13). Bishop states in this regard that it is no longer tenable to define art, and specifically performance art, from the “shelter of sixties art history and its values” (Bishop, 2004: 53).

### **Relational Aesthetics and Performance Art**

Bourriaud’s theory on ‘Relational Aesthetics’ opens performance art up to a less teleological and reactionary means of defining the medium. ‘Relational Aesthetics’ calls for 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 or private space” (Bourriaud, 2002: 45). That is, art is judged on the inter-human relations which they represent, produce, or prompt.

Under this banner, the definition of performance art becomes focused, not on the act that the artist ‘performs,’ but rather on the creation of an interstice<sup>27</sup> between artist and beholder (Bourriaud, 2002: 80). While the ‘traditional’ understanding of performance art called for the live-presence of a performer to signal, “hey, look at me! I’m on!”, ‘Relational Aesthetics’ calls for the creation of sites of interactivity (Bauman in Auslander, 2005: 27). As such, the performance can be understood as the creation of a “dynamic relationship,” through the interaction between an audience, the given environment and the “artistic proposition” (Bourriaud, 2002: 21 and 111).

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<sup>27</sup> According to Bourriaud the ‘interstice’ refers to the “space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system” (Bourriaud, 2002: 16).

Importantly, according to 'Relational Aesthetics,' the production of an image through video or photographic documentation can equally create a site for interaction (Bourriaud, 2002: 111). Bourriaud cites the work of Gillian Wearing: *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1993) as a prime exemplar of this form of performance (Bourriaud, 2002: 46). Wearing selected various passers-by at random and asked them to write their thoughts on a piece of paper. She then photographed them holding up their hand-written signs to the camera. One image of a policeman shows him holding up a scrawled sign: "Help!" (see plate 6). Another shows a young man in a business suit with "I'm Desperate" written on his board (Cotton, 2007: 30). According to 'Relational Aesthetics,' while Wearing is not *performing* for the camera, nor is she 'live' in the conventional sense, she is creating a social interstice, a site for performance action (Bourriaud, 2002: 46). As such, the 'performance process' – the interaction with the public, casting, etc. – as well as the 'objects' produced – photographs, texts, etc. – are "an outcome of human-relations" merely rendered "concrete" (Bourriaud, 2002: 48).



Plate 6: Gillian Wearing, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say*, 1993

Unlike the performance ‘traditionalist,’ Bourriaud states that while Wearing and other artists may have a preference for recording their acts via video or photography, they are not “video artists” (Bourriaud, 2002: 46). Rather, “the medium merely turns out to be the one best suited to the formalisations of certain activities and projects” (Bourriaud, 2002: 46). Further, Bourriaud states that “the manoeuvrability of video... means it can be used as a reified replacement for presence” (Bourriaud, 2002: 75). As such, Abramovic’s use of a video streaming to disseminate her work *The Artist is Present* seems more in line with the idea of ‘presence’ than posited by the more fundamentalist critic. Under the banner of ‘Relational Aesthetics,’ the ‘objects’ – videos, texts

or photographs – created through these social interstices are an “intrinsic part of the language... regarded as vehicles of relations to the other” (Bourriaud, 2002: 47). Thus, documentation can be seen as an integral part of the transmission of the act rather than merely a supplement or addendum to the ‘live’ accomplishment. Further, the aesthetic significance of the documentation need not be seen as incompatible to the ‘live-ness’ of the artwork. Bishop writes in this regard: “the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative process” (Bishop, 2010). Thus, under ‘Relational Aesthetics,’ the documents associated with performance art, rather than being incompatible, become integral to the creation of performance art (Kolesch & Lehman 2005: 68).

In further opposition to ‘traditional’ performance art, Bourriaud’s theory also acknowledges the importance of the gallery as a democratic site for interactivity to occur. He states that the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition is to “create free areas, and time spans, whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life and encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the ‘communication zones’ that are imposed upon us” (Bourriaud, 2002: 16). Thus, the ‘Modernist’ notion of the capitalist gallery space is rejected, where the gallery becomes a zone for social interaction. If this is the case, and with many galleries having openly embraced performance art activities since the early 1960s, the ‘traditionalist’ criticism of artists, such as Barney, having “defiled” performance art by encroaching into gallery territories seems moot (Goldberg, 2001: 7 and Burnham, 1986: 18).

Bourriaud further posits that while the documentation of a performance can be accessed at any time, the 'live-ness' of 'traditional' performance is in fact marked by "non-availability, by being viewable only at a specific time" (Bourriaud, 2002: 11). In terms of this view, Burnham's statement – that non-traditional performance art has created a situation where the "audience has retreated so far that performance can't reach it" (Burnham, 1986: 44) – seems deeply inequitable and incongruous.

### **'Theatrical' Performance Art**

In line with Bourriaud's claim to interactivity, Phillip Auslander proposes a new category of performance art, which he terms 'theatrical' performance. 'Theatrical' performance refers to works where the "performances were staged solely to be recorded by one means or another and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences" (Auslander, 2005: 23). Auslander proposes that the site for interactivity within this category can equally be created through the artists' engagement with the camera (Auslander, 2005: 29). Auslander examines Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) to illustrate this theory (see plate 7). In *Shoot*, Burden had a friend shoot him in the arm with a rifle, from a distance of 15 feet. The iconic act was shocking in that Burden risked his life for the performance: "with real blood and acute pain" it could have gone horribly wrong (Goldberg: 2004, 107). As a thought experiment, Auslander asks us to consider:

What would happen were we to learn that there actually was no audience for... "Shoot", that he simply performed the piece in an empty gallery and documented it. I suggest that such a revelation would make no difference at all to our perception of the performance, our understanding of it as an object of interpretation and evaluation, and our assessment of its historical significance.

(Auslander, 2005: 29)



Plate 7: Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971

And indeed, there seems to be no real difference to the understanding of the work; the groundbreaking performance remains just that.

In line with this, Bourriaud states that “meaning and sense are the outcome of an interaction between artist and beholder, and not an authoritarian fact” (Bourriaud, 2002: 80). Thus the experience of Burden’s performance is not based simply on ‘being there’; rather the beholder must engage with the work for it to succeed (Bourriaud, 2002: 82). Auslander’s thought experiment highlights that the ‘virtuosity’ of performance does not necessarily reside in the presence of the performer but perhaps more so in the beholder’s engagement with the “originality and audacity of conception and execution” (Auslander, 2005: 27).

I have cited Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist is Present* (see plate 8) throughout the previous two chapters. It was, in fact, one of the performances I was able to witness firsthand. While seeing Abramovic in her celebrity was exciting, it was not seeing the artist seated in a chair that was dynamic, but the greater contextual understanding that she had been there for over six hundred hours already by the time I saw her. In line with Auslander’s thought experiment and Bourriaud’s argument, the presence of a live audience to witness Abramovic perform seemed cursory. The performance was moving in its display of endurance, not as an interactional accomplishment between the audience and Abramovic, where the audience provided an equally important contribution to the performance itself. The concept of the performance could just have easily been read through her web-cam. The “meaning and sense” of Abramovic’s performance thus lies in the “outcome of [...the] interaction between artist and beholder” (Bourriaud, 2002: 80) and in the “originality and audacity of [its] conception and execution” (Auslander, 2005: 27).



Plate 8: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

It is important to note that 'Relational Aesthetics' still bears a strong resemblance to 'traditional' performance art. Bourriaud's theory encourages the idea that the "artistic proposition" can affect an audience and produce "sociability" (Bourriaud, 2002: 16). Further, Bourriaud states that it is absurd to assume that "contemporary art does not involve any political project" (Bourriaud, 2002: 13). Thus, performance art is still focused on an 'engagement' with an audience, as well as a political proposition.

However, Bourriaud makes room for a less dogmatic and more open-ended 'type' of performance art in terms of a contemporary theorisation. He argues that artists are no longer concerned with 'traditionalist' performance agendas and attempting to create possible "utopian" worlds. Rather, contemporary

practitioners are concerned with creating solutions for the here and now (Bourriaud, 2002: 11). Instead of attempting to change their environment through direct aggressive action, artists are simply “learning how to inhabit the world in a better way” (Bishop, 1994: 53 and Bourriaud, 2002: 13). In line with this, South African writer and critic, Alex Dodd states: “We’re no longer living in an era where it is radical to... deconstruct or to just piss on the establishment... in fact it is a braver act in this era to tenderly put things back together again” (Dodd, 2004).

For the vehement performance ‘traditionalist,’ it seems that to accept the changing face of performance is to concede to Modernism. However, according to Bourriaud, Modernism cannot be “reduced to a rationalist teleology.” Rather than focusing on a rejection of Modernism, performance art under ‘Relational Aesthetics’ explores encounters and participation. The “artistic proposition” thus becomes focused on creating an “area of exchange” rather than a “transcendent experience” in witnessing a performer ‘perform’ (Bishop, 2010).

Bourriaud and Auslander have opened performance up to a less teleological form than advanced by the performance ‘traditionalist.’ Bourriaud states that whatever the “fundamentalists clinging to yesterday’s good taste may say and think, present-day art is roundly taking on and taking up the legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes, while at the same time challenging their dogmatism” (Bourriaud, 2002: 45). If we accept then, that ‘traditional’ performance art contains inherent flaws, and further that it cannot exist completely apart from

the art establishment, Bourriaud's and Auslander's theories provide a persuasive argument for a reassessment of performance art. Under this understanding, the incompatibility between the live-act and the documentation can be reconciled. Performance documentation can thus shed its awkward role as 'sidekick' in order to come into its own.

In the following chapters I will explore specific examples of this form of performance art, and examine how artists have embraced video and photography as fundamental to the performance act.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Theatrical performance: The pioneers**

This chapter will explore Yves Klein, Joan Jonas and Bruce Nauman as pioneers within the field of 'theatrical' performance. From the mid-1960s, Klein, Nauman and Jonas began utilising video and photographic documentation as central to the creation of the performance act. Within this form of 'theatrical' production, video and film was not only used to "reproduce or document the various performances," but also, as fundamental to the aesthetic "(re)presentation" of the performance acts (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 67). Rejecting the "traditional genre definitions" surrounding performance, documentation was embraced as an equal contributor in the creation of the performance act (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68). This chapter will explore various case studies within this groundbreaking approach to performance art.

#### **Joan Jonas and Mediality**

Jonas' *Left Side Right Side* was produced, in studio, in 1972. Rejecting the 'traditional' notion of the 'performer' as needing the "collaborative participation of an audience" to authorise the event, Jonas began exploring a more self-reflexive and privatised engagement with the performance act (Auslander, 2005: 27). *Left Side Right Side* saw Jonas performing, not to a live audience, but rather to the camera, where the camera became directly linked to her

“artistic strategy” (Bourriaud, 2002 and Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68). Jonas describes the set up for the performance:

One camera behind [a] mirror and monitor frames my face and [a] blackboard, while the other camera behind me frames [a] monitor and [a] mirror. The camera facing me feeds into the monitor, so that I see my image both reflected in the mirror and in the monitor, as does the camera behind me. The video cuts between these two images and sometimes juxtaposes them.

(Jonas in Schneider, 2010)

The artist performs a simple task – pointing to either her left or right eye. The monitor first displays the ‘real’ footage of her face, then, its inverted mirror image (Tate, 2010) (see plate 9). The dual views of Jonas’ face challenge any logical sense of bilateral body orientation (Howell, 1977: 34). The simple task of ‘pointing’ becomes increasingly confusing, where at one point “we see Jonas’ hand coming into shot and hesitating briefly before making a decision” as to which, is in fact, her left or right eye (Tate, 2010). Utilising two camera perspectives and alternating configurations between the left and right of the video screen, any ‘authenticity’ or verisimilitude within the documentation becomes deconstructed. Jonas states in this regard: “what interests me is [that]... you can’t really perceive the space; you have to piece it together... in the virtual space of the monitor” (Jonas in Schneider, 2010).



Plate 9: Joan Jonas, *Left Side Right Side*, 1972

*Left Side Right Side* is very much rooted within the spirit of performance art from the late 1960s. Strongly influenced by feminism and psychoanalysis, the project explored Jacques Lacan's theoretical work on the "ego-consciousness and the mirror stage"<sup>28</sup> (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 71). However, Jonas moves the exploration toward a private, introspective exploration of the subject matter<sup>29</sup>. Howell states the performance is a personal discovery of "perception, disjunctions, illusions [and] double-takes"; where the split halves of Jonas' face become a "study of reversals" (Howell, 1977: 34). Rather than

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<sup>28</sup> Lacan posits a complex relationship between the permanent structure of subjectivity and the subject's cognisance of itself as a 'self' in the mirror. Lacan states: "the mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image" (Lacan in Evans, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> While the closed subjectivity of the performance could be seen as a return to Modernist self-referentialism, Krauss states that the use of video is counter to the mirroring subjectivity of Modernist art in that it "withdraws attention from an external object" – where the video is simply an appurtenance for the artist's project (Krauss, 1976: 58).

seeing the use of video simply as a “technical medium that records,” Jonas utilised the technical and aesthetic possibilities of the medium of film as part of the performance act (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 71). Jonas states in this regard: “personally speaking, I think a simple reproduction is not really interesting. It’s kind of a waste of time, because there is no pushing the piece further in any way... All of my performances are concerned in part with the image as metaphor. There is an emotion in the image that cannot be translated. The image contains it” (Jonas, 2004: 52). Thus rejecting the “hit-or-miss amateurish” ‘authenticity’ of ‘traditional’ performance documentation, Jonas embraced a highly artificial and contrived approach to her performance videos (Taylor, 2005: 223). Discarding the need for the ‘traditional’ performance imperatives of ‘live-ness’ and audience interaction, the work focuses on a premeditated engagement with both the subject matter and the documentation, a clear example of Auslander’s ‘theatrical’ performance.

In *Vertical Roll* (1972), Jonas began pushing the aesthetic medial dispositives of her video documentation further (see plate 10). The work concentrates on a specific ‘fault’ of the medium, created through two out-of-sync frequencies. The resultant ‘malfunction’ produces a series of rolling lines on the monitor (Media Art Net, 2010). Jonas used the “vertical rolls” to create a particular aesthetic within the documentation, fragmenting and distorting her body (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 71). Close-ups of her face and body ‘roll’ onto the screen, accompanied by a rhythmic “staccato-like beat, a kind of metallic banging noise” (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 71). Any logical sense of time is dissolved through the “constant sweep of the camera [that] renders the

movements invisible” (Krauss, 1976: 60). The final seconds of the tape reveal Jonas facing the camera – the only direct reference to a coherent spatial relationship within the otherwise eroded and dissolved imagery (Krauss, 1976: 61). Rather than seeking to create ‘authenticity’ or ‘objectivity’ within the framing of the act, Jonas deliberately contrived the aesthetic predispositions of the medium as central to both the conception and execution of the performance. As such, the work was less about “the direct action and the physical presence of the body” than its representation as an image (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 69).



Plate 10: Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972

While critics have asserted that “since the viewer does not witness the physical act directly,” the work is not *performance*, or rather that it is video art,

under Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics,' the medium of documentation simply becomes the best way for Jonas to formalise her performance act (Erickson, 1999: 99 and Bourriaud, 2002: 46). Pushing Bourriaud's theory one step further, Kolesch and Lehman assert that the "concept of interaction must thus be... defined as an open circulation of various dimensions of the artistic practice, including the performative use of the body, a sculptural language of image, and the technical conditions of the medium... none of which can be separated out from the others, as they all relate to each other in mutual dependence" (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 70). Rejecting the premise of performance art as a *necessarily live* spectacle, the performance is thus defined through the interaction between the artist and the camera, where the camera becomes "a reified replacement for presence" (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 70 and Bourriaud, 2002: 46).

### **Bruce Nauman, Yves Klein and Impossibility**

Alongside Jonas, Bruce Nauman similarly began exploring the use of documentation, not as a supplement to his performances, but rather as central to the performance itself (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 71). The availability of portable video cameras, like the Sony Portapak<sup>30</sup>, opened up new technical possibilities within the field of documentation (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 70). In *Slow Angle Walk* (1968), Nauman performs directly to the camera, walking "with his arms behind his back and his legs thrust forward

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<sup>30</sup> The Sony Portapak was introduced to the market in 1967: "It was a two-piece set consisting of a black and white camera and a separate record-only helical 1/2" VCR unit. It required a Sony CV series VTR to play back the video. Although it was light enough for a single person to carry and use, it was usually operated by a crew of two: one carrying and controlling the camera, and one carrying and operating the VCR part" (Shapiro, 2006).

on a square drawn on the floor, alternating between bending his torso down or leaning back” (Archer, 2002: 100) (see plate 11). However, rather than creating a realistic sense of the space, he utilises the camera to create an illusion within the production of the work. By placing the camera upside down, or angling it at ninety degrees, Nauman creates a filmic ‘special-effect,’ where his body seems to perform logically impossible acts such as walking up a vertical wall (Archer, 2002: 101).



Plate 11: Bruce Nauman, *Slow Angle Walk*, 1968

The ‘special-effect’ of Nauman’s work opens up a further area for consideration within the field of ‘theatrical’ performance. As no audience is present to witness the act, the mediation of the final image is not only focused on aestheticisation, but is also ‘counterfeit’ to the ‘reality’ of ‘what happened.’

While photography and video has been traditionally viewed as a means of “accessing the reality of the performance,” Nauman’s manipulation of space directly challenges the assumption of the ‘reality-effect’ of the documented image (Auslander, 2005: 26). Further, it creates an obviously specious performance: one that *looks real*, but could never really have happened.

Auslander argues, however, that whether a performance *could* really happen, or *did* really happen, is not a significant difference (Auslander, 2005: 26). In this regard, Auslander explores Yves Klein’s iconic image, *Leap into the Void* (1960) (see plate 12). The image is a single shot of Klein leaping fearlessly off the second story of a building in a seemingly life-threatening jump (Goldberg, 2004: 33). In reality, however, Klein leapt into a blanket held by friends, and then later superimposed the empty street scene onto the photograph in the darkroom. Auslander argues that in relation to the practice of performance documentation, *Leap into the Void* is equally true as a performance work, despite the fact that the performances never “really” happened (Auslander, 2005: 21).

He draws an analogy with the Beatles album, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*:

to argue that Klein’s leap was not a performance because it took place only within the photographic space would be equivalent to arguing that the Beatles did not perform the music on their *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album because

that performance exists only on the space of the recording: the group never actually performed the music as we hear it.

(Auslander, 2005: 30)

He concludes that such a claim would be “absurd”: “of course the Beatles performed [their] music... and of course Yves Klein performed his jump” (Auslander, 2005: 30). As such, despite Nauman performing an ‘impossible’ act, the performance, within Auslander’s definition, is still a performance, “constituted as such through the performativity of its documentation” (Auslander, 2005: 30).



Plate 12: Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*, 1960

Jonas, Nauman, and Klein's groundbreaking work exemplifies the use of documentation as part of the 'theatrical' definition of performance art. *Left Side Right Side*, *Vertical Roll*, and *Slow Angle Walk* had "no meaningful prior existence as [an] autonomous event presented to [an] audience" (Auslander, 2005: 23). Further, the performances could "neither be conceived nor produced" without a specific use of video and photographic documentation (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68).

Rejecting the expectations of performance art as a necessarily 'live-act,' the artists discussed recognised documentation as a means to "stage the body as a moving object in space" (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68). Forty years on, under Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics,' this form of performance can be seen as creating a specific form of "interactivity," where the camera replaces the live audience as 'witness' to the act (Bourriaud, 2002: 74).

Building on the insights gained from this chapter, the following chapter will explore further complexities within the field of 'theatrical' performance through the contemporary practice of South African artist, Bridget Baker.

## Chapter Five

### Bridget Baker: To the far end and back

According to Kathryn Smith, Bridget Baker's practice has remained "frustratingly for some... just beyond the reach of complete cognitive comprehension" (Smith, 2006: 4). Sidestepping 'traditional' genre definitions around performance art, Baker's shifting process has defied easy classification. While Baker defines her own practice within the fields of performance and performativity, her work directly challenges the role of the artist as *performer* in favour of the creation of performance art as "a state of encounter" (Bourriaud in Smith, 2006: 4). Further confounding definitions, the tangible documentation of these *encounters* has moved swiftly from an early engagement with 'traditional' documentation toward an increasing focus on the aesthetic value of the 'end product.' Through interviews with Baker from both 2007 and 2010, I will explore her evolving methodology, and examine further complexities within the field of 'theatrical' performance toward 'performed photography.' The insights from this chapter will provide a theoretical counterpoint for the discussion of my own practice in chapter six.

### Interactivity and 'Authenticity' in Documentation

In early 2001, Baker launched her *Official BB Projects* and began exploring "the idea of art as an enjoyable, if unforeseeable, part of everyday life" (Smith, 2006: 4) (see plate 13). In her first project, *Official BB Leaf Project* (2001), Baker took up the window of the *Kwikkleen Dry Cleaner's* on a busy

pedestrian street in the Stellenbosch city centre. Over a three-month period, working between standard 09h00 to 17h00 business hours, Baker spent the days punching out leaf shapes from ATM<sup>31</sup> receipts. According to Baker, the project sought to explore the exhausting bureaucratic activities involved in being “considered a good citizen” (Baker, 2010). The public was then invited to interact with the project by signing the punched ‘leaves’ of paper. Baker states, “I wanted to explore the artmaking process as a communal act.... How does a community of passers-by and not the art elite respond to the diverse ways of making art by making it in a public space” (Baker, 2007).



Plate 13: Bridget Baker, *Official BB Leaf Project*, 2001

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<sup>31</sup> ATM is the acronym for an Automated Teller Machine and is also referred to as a 'cash point' or 'cash machine' (Wikipedia, 2011).

*Official BB Leaf Project* clearly references ‘traditional<sup>32</sup>’ performance art. Through the mobilisation of art “away from gallery [and] exhibition space[s] into actual locations,” the work engages with an audience in real-time (Smith, 2006: 5). Furthermore, the documentation of the event, in keeping with ‘documentary’ style documentation is “devoted to capturing as much of the total visual experience of [the] actual performance as possible” (Argelander in Lambert-Beatty, 2005:114). As such, the ‘snap-shots’ become a record of the event, a “reminder” of the “context, space, action [and] ideas” of her work (Argelander in Lambert-Beatty, 2005:114 and Jones in Auslander, 2005: 23). The shoot-from-the-hip style images equally frame Baker, the audience – most often peering through the window of the *Kwikkleen* – and the performance act itself. As such, they implicate themselves as ‘authentic’ photographic evidence in their de-skilled technique, bearing the “attendant strengths (a candid documentary feel) and weaknesses (occasionally flat, banal compositions) that snapshots connote” (Dalton, 2000: 47).

However, rather than ‘performing’ to an audience in the ‘traditional’ sense, *Official BB Leaf Project* can be understood on “the basis of the inter-human relations” which it represents, produces or prompts (Smith, 2006: 5). The transactions between Baker and the ‘passers-by’ sought to encourage “inter-human commerce”; one-on-one encounters rather than a performance directed at a “collective social entity” (Smith, 2006: 3 and Bishop, 2004: 54). By asking specific individuals to sign the ‘leaves’ of paper, Baker had the opportunity to engage with people directly, including “a thief,... bank

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<sup>32</sup> Smith likens Baker’s work to that of the European Fluxus movement, and specifically Joseph Beuys, in its emphasis away from the finished object towards the process of its making where “the democracy of the process can breathe” (Smith, 2006: 5).

managers, [and] the people who offload at Shoprite” (Baker, 2007 and Smith, 2006: 5). Thus, in line with Bourriaud’s ‘Relational Aesthetics,’ Baker’s performativity derives, not from the ‘traditional’ notion of performance as an “act of expression,” but rather from the creation of sociability and social interaction (Auslander, 2005: 27). Kathryn Smith describes this as the defining aspect of Baker’s work, where it is the “sphere of human relations [that] constitutes the site of [her] artwork’s meaning” (Smith, 2006: 3).

### **Interactivity and Aestheticisation in Documentation**

While Baker’s exploration of “intersubjective encounters” as the site for performance and performativity has continued through more recent works, her approach to documentation has shifted considerably (Bishop, 2004: 54). Moving away from the ‘traditional’ documentary approach, Baker has become increasingly focused on the “singular moment when the performative act is sufficient (or not) to allude to the full performance” (Baker, 2010). She explains:

I became intrigued by the strategy of capturing [a] performance in time, by structuring the capture for the lens, so creating a choreographed performance. Performance has so many parts, acts of engaging with the viewer or the camera are choreographed by the performer, the viewer and the documenter.

(Baker, 2010)

*The Blue Collar Girl* series (2004/5) exemplifies Baker's shift in documentation methodology. Baker explored the photographic documentation within this project, not only as a means to 'capture' the performance, but also as "fundamental to the practice of (re)presentation within production aesthetics" (Kolesch & Lehman, 2005: 68). Rejecting the traditional notion of 'documentary' photography as "looking for the moment of great visual charge or intrigue [to] appear in the photographic frame," *The Blue Collar Girl* is carefully styled according to a 'treatment'<sup>33</sup> (Cotton, 2007: 8). Each element of the series is pre-planned – costumes, props and so on – with the photographic object "destined to be [a] final outcome," not merely a by-product, or addendum, to an action that has now passed (Cotton, 2007: 8).

Shot on location in Cape Town, Delhi, Maputo and Ghent, the series depicts a literal and metaphorical 'blue-collar worker' engaged in various actions. Rejecting the traditional role of the "worker" as "just part of the treadmill... in a space to make something happen for someone else," the 'Blue Collar Girl' is depicted as a dare-devil, a figure of mystic and epic proportions (Smith, 2006: 14).

The series follows a structured narrative sequence: "The first [image] is a portrait, composed differently in each series... the second is a shot of [the] context, a kind of filmic establishing shot... the third is the detail shot where on a surface or object the phrase *Only you can* © is legible" (Malcomess, 2009: 48) (see plate 14). Exploring one of the triptychs in detail, the first frame

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<sup>33</sup> The term 'treatment' refers to a process of art direction within commercial shoots where colour usage, lighting style, camera angle and so on are planned beforehand, as a way to 'treat' the final photographic outcome.

of *The Blue Collar Girl (Delhi)* shows a Sherman-esque<sup>34</sup> figure being measured by a tailor in her iconic cobalt coat, as if readying herself for some unspecified act. On the wall above her, an autographed shot of an archetypal film star states “break a leg.” The second frame shows the ‘Blue Collar Girl’ as a “Where’s Waldo” figure in a maze of people in New Delhi’s crowded streets – the protagonist is barely visible, pedalling an impossibly laden cart up the road (Dalton, 2000:47) (see plate 15, 16 and 17). The final image shows a close up of the cart’s contents – a package silk-screened with Baker’s leitmotif: “Only you can ©”<sup>35</sup>. According to Smith, the images speak of the ‘worker’ “liberating [her]self from the complex terrain of social, economic, class and gender politics” (Smith, 2006: 15). Baker’s social commentary becomes more observation than criticism, an optimistic “unmasking [of] the alpha-female” by a ‘super-heroine’ character (Smith, 2006: 3).



Plate 14: Bridget Baker, *The Blue Collar Girl (Durban)*, 2005

<sup>34</sup> Baker’s characterisations bear a marked influence from Cindy Sherman’s early performed photographs from her *Untitled Film Stills* series. The self-conscious use of disguise, the film-noir references to the *femme-fatal*, and the implication of narrative are recurring currencies within both of their work (Malcomess, 2009: 24 and Cotton, 2007: 193)

<sup>35</sup> Importantly, Baker states that while there is no visible bodily presence in these final images, “there isn’t always a need for a figure in the work, for it to be performative.... A persona is implicated by the presence and placement of objects” (Baker, 2010).

In an important shift within this body of work, Baker removes herself from the position of ‘performer’ to that of auteur:

for the [Blue Collar Girl] I knew that the character should not be me, I wanted to be in a position of auteur. The woman who plays the role as the [Blue Collar Girl] cannot be me, as she is a reflection of [an] idea...

(Baker, 2010)

Unlike Nauman and Jonas (discussed in chapter four), the definitions around performance art are thus further extended, where Baker becomes the creator, rather than the performer, of the performance act. Drawing on her experience as a stylist within the film and advertising industries, Baker’s position within the shoots becomes that of originator and organiser to the *relational procedure* (Malcomess, 2009: 26). In each instance of *The Blue Collar Girl*, Baker sources her cast and crew “where required, from a local context” (Gurney, 2006). According to Baker, “the finding of the people to collaborate with – the photographer, the [Blue Collar Girl] and the location – became the crucial aspect of the project” (Baker, 2010). As such, the creation of “social exchanges” between Baker, the photographers, actors, collaborators and so on, become the *relational* aspect to work as a performance (Bourriaud, 2002: 71).



Plate 15: Bridget Baker, *The Blue Collar Girl (Delhi)*, 2005 (frame 1)



Plate 16: Bridget Baker, *The Blue Collar Girl (Delhi)*, 2005 (frame 2)



Plate 17: Bridget Baker, *The Blue Collar Girl* (Delhi), 2005 (frame 3)

Furthermore, *The Blue Collar Girl* is still very much rooted in performance art as a public enterprise. The performances are based in specific communities and are, to a degree, dependent on the peripheral action around them (Smith, 2006: 14). Thus, the final images remain open to the element of spontaneity and chance, ‘authentic’ shots of captured action (Baker, 2008). However, as with *Official BB Leaf Project*, rather than *performing* to a “mythicized... unified mass” – such as the grand gestures of Voina’s *Palace Revolution* – the work focuses on the creation of “momentary experiences,” a “one-to-one” relationship developed within a community, however “small” or “temporary” it might be (Bourriaud, 2002: 61 and Bishop, 2004: 54). Whether it be pedalling up a crowded street in Delhi, or sewing amidst ‘workers’ in Durban’s DavinScott Manufacturing Plant, the ‘Blue Collar Girl’ infiltrates the “local

history and mythology” of an area whereby the ‘act’ becomes a story that “survives the event itself” (Smith, 2006: 4).

Thus, despite removing herself from the role of the ‘performer,’ Baker’s *The Blue Collar Girl* can be seen as an instance of *performance art* through its dual performance focus. Firstly, through the action of the ‘Blue Collar Girl’ as a moving body in space, and further, through the ‘performance process’ – the interaction with the public, the casting and so on. In line with relational aesthetics, the photographs are thus “an outcome of human-relations” merely rendered “concrete” (Bourriaud, 2002: 48).

### **Interactivity and Performed Photography**

Within two of her more recent projects, *The Maiden Perfect* and *The Botched Epic Attempt to Escape the Maiden* (2005), Baker further pushes the genre definitions around performance art. While she returns to the role of ‘performer,’ Baker removes the ‘acts’ from the public domain, establishing and recording the actions in a studio space. The creation of these studio ‘sets’ becomes an integral component to the final image, with each element being carefully designed and constructed. This field of ‘theatrical’ performance is often referred to as *performed photography*, an “interdisciplinary genre that highlights the relationship between the performative act and the act of photography” (Auslander, 2005: 28 and Jeff, 2008: 4). According to Paul Jeff, the common currency of performed photography is “performance, duration, and the document as a creative act whereby photography meets live-art” (Jeff,

2008: 4). Performed photography<sup>36</sup> thus straddles a dual focus, encompassing both the performativity of a performance act, alongside the aesthetic sensibility of “tableau<sup>37</sup>” photography (Goldberg, 2004: 223).

In *The Maiden Perfect* (2005), Baker takes on the role of the ‘maiden,’ shown desperately clinging to the rails of a ‘sinking ship’ (see plate 18). The protagonist appears very much a fictitious character, an “anonymous woman at the point of her dying as if in a 1950s filmic moment” (Baker, 2005). The dramatic scene is carefully constructed with a wooden deck, complete with shuffleboard motif, a lifesaver and guardrails. However, certain elements disturb the verisimilitude of the image and frame the work as intensely theatrical: a painstakingly embroidered ‘seascape’ backdrop, as well as the hyper-dramatic pose and exaggerated shadows. Baker states that she used

styling elements authentic to that time, lighting the piece so that the light on the space was reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood studio work [where] film speeds were slow, so the lighting had to compensate by being intense, creating... inevitably: drama.

(Baker, 2010)

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<sup>36</sup> Cindy Sherman’s series of *Untitled Film Stills* is perhaps one of the most recognisable and well-known examples of performed photography. Sherman completed the series of eighty-four black-and-white photographs between 1977 and 1980. Each image depicts the artist impersonating one or another female character in a series of archetypal filmic moments (Fried, 2008:7). According to Taylor, it is the centrality of the human figure within the images that “connects the work to the past thirty years of performance art” (Taylor, 2005: 223).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Tableau’ or ‘tableau vivant’ refers to a style of photography described as “constructed or staged... [where] the elements depicted and even the precise camera angles are worked out in advance and drawn together to articulate a preconceived idea for the creation of the image” (Cotton, 2007: 8).

This 'anti-realistic' approach is a bold shift away from the photographic 'authenticity' within *Official BB Leaf Project* and *The Blue Collar Girl* series.

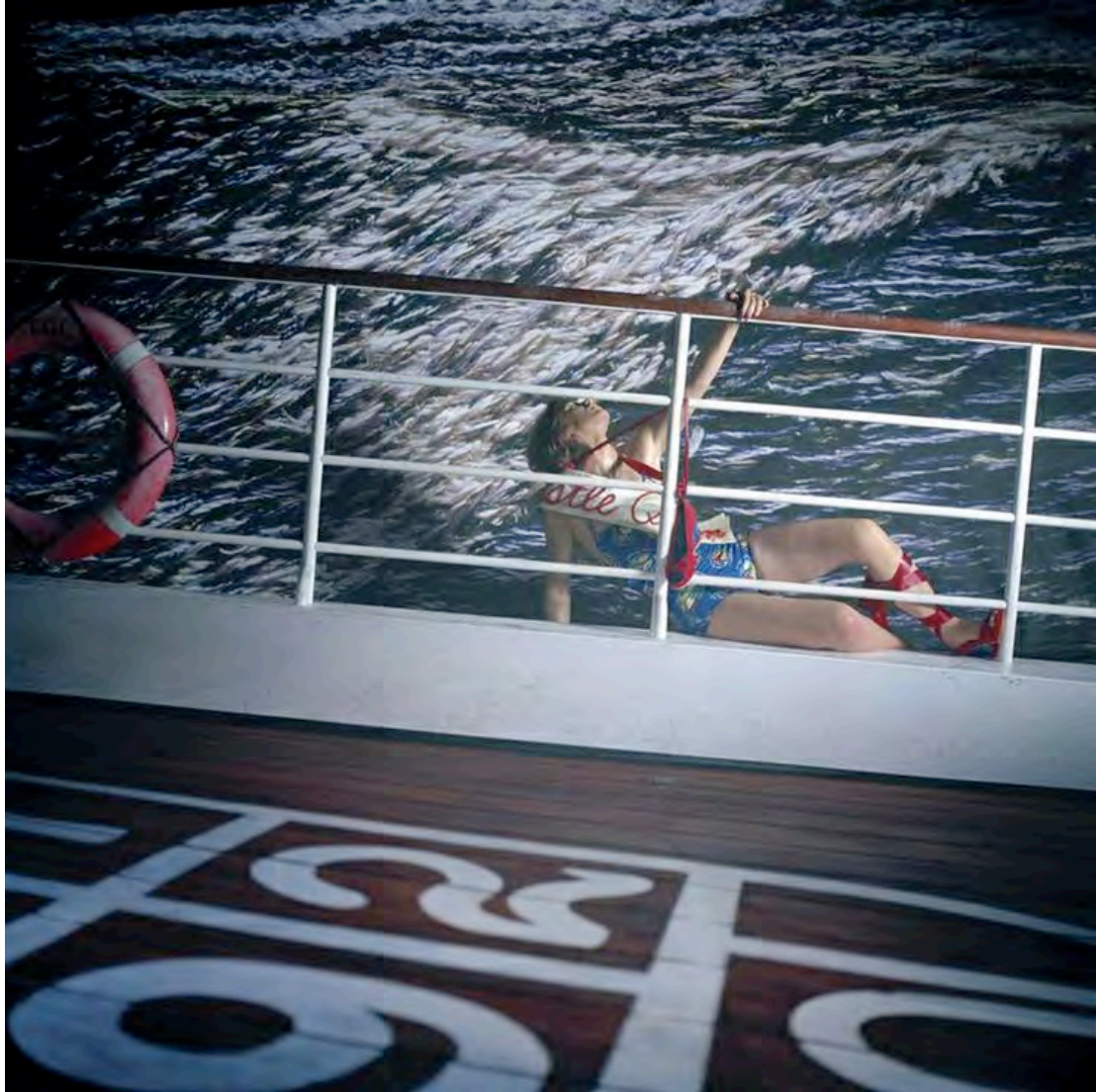


Plate 18: Bridget Baker, *The Maiden Perfect*, 2005

*The Maiden Perfect*, as an instance of performed photography, thus seems to further challenge the 'traditional' understanding of performance art and documentation. Not only is it removed from any direct audience engagement, but it is also heavily 'theatricalised.' In his article, 'Performing Distinctions' in *A Journal of Performance and Art*, writer and critic Jon Erickson argues that

performance art defeats its premise “when it includes performed photography... since these recordings cannot qualify as live-art (Erickson, 1999: 99). Similarly, Charlotte Cotton states that since the “viewer does not witness the physical act directly” the images become photographic works (Cotton, 2007: 21). However, as evidenced in chapters two and three, if the ‘live-ness’ of the act is removed as a prerequisite for a performance to occur, and further, that an aesthetic focus is not incompatible to its production, performed photography can equally be defined within the category of performance art (Auslander, 2005: 23). As an instance of this, *The Maiden Perfect* can be seen to retain a dual focus on performance art: the image still centres on the “planning and arranging [of a] body in space.” Further, the work remains focused on the ‘relational procedure,’ where the accompanying production list reads like a credit roll from a movie, including set builders, riggers, prop designers, seamstresses, wig stylists and patternmakers, to name but a few (Berghuis, 2006: 2). As such, the image is intended to be read as a *part of a process* rather than purely as an outcome in itself (Malcomess, 2009: 30).

Baker’s take on performance, alongside the likes of Mathew Barney and Vanessa Beecroft, has pushed the ‘traditional’ concept of both performance art and performance documentation to ever more complex realms. Goldberg refers to this style of production as a “cross-pollination... between performance, MTV, advertising and fashion” (Goldberg, 2001: 225). Combining “extravagant scenarios” with “an awareness of performance art history,” performed photography openly embraces commercial techniques and

the creation iconography within the field of performance art (Goldberg, 2004: 223). However, rather than seeing the creation of a video or photographic work purely as a “thing in itself,” the final product is at the end of a process, a set of relational procedures and ‘acts,’ based on the artists’ unique “aesthetic project and sensibility” (White, 2010 and Auslander, 2005: 32). As such, the work defines itself “*as a performance,*” rather than as photographic or video art (Auslander, 2005: 32).

In the following chapter, through a body of work I created in response to these complexities, I will further dissect the multipart relationship that exists between performance art, the live ‘act,’ and performance documentation.

## Chapter Six

### Girl, you know it's true

This chapter will focus on my own art practice, and its relevance to the discourse within this research paper. Following a remarkably similar path to that of Bridget Baker, my work has moved from an early engagement with 'traditional' performance art and a focus on 'authenticity' in documentation, toward increasingly staged and 'theatrical' performance. I will briefly track this evolution, and explore the definitional problematics that have arisen as a result of this shift in methodology. Through a new body of work for my exhibition, *Girl, you know it's true* at the Circa Gallery in Johannesburg (July, 2010), I will mobilise my position on performance art as defined: not through the 'live-ness' of the act, but rather as based on the "sphere of human relations" which are represented, prompted or produced (Bourriaud in Smith, 2006: 3). This chapter deals directly with the issues explored within this research paper, and argues for a reassessment of the 'traditional' relationship between performance art and performance documentation, where documentation is able to come to the fore as a 'hero' in its own right.

In 2005 I had the opportunity to attend a talk by Marina Abramovic at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and see her perform *Spirit Cooking*. The talk signalled a revolution within my own art practice<sup>38</sup>. The groundbreaking work in performance art from the last 30 years explored acts of rebellion "aimed at identifying and defining limits... of an audience's relationship with a performer;

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<sup>38</sup> Linda Frye Burnham (who founded the first magazine devoted entirely to live performance in the visual arts in 1978 entitled *High Performance*), reports a similar sensation in her first encounter with performance art where it created "a significant shift in [her] consciousness" (Burnham, 1986: 17).

of art and, by extension, of the codes that govern society<sup>39</sup>” (Lacan, 2011). Typifying the paradigms inherent in ‘traditional’ performance art, Abramovic defined performance as a form of activism, a medium that should: 1) be disturbing, 2) ask questions, and 3) predict the future and transform the present and future (Abramovic, 2005). As an artist with the, perhaps naïve, belief in the responsibility of art to effect social criticism, performance art, with its “sacrificial commitment... to political activism,” (Burnham, 1986: 30) seemed to be the most effective and sincere means of communicating my position as an artist.

### **Sober&Lonely: From ‘Authenticity’ to ‘Theatricality’**

Under a collaborative partnership called Sober&Lonely<sup>40</sup> I began utilising performance art as a means to activate a social commentary, addressing issues peculiar to a South African context. The intention of the work, at that stage, was very much in line with the anti-art, anti-establishment ideologies of ‘traditional’ performance art: the ambiguous name itself, following the anti-modernism inherent in ‘traditional’ performance art, removed any ‘authorial’ claim to the work. Sober&Lonely began exploring performance, in line with Berghuis’ characterisation of the medium, as a means to “flout the restrictions that govern social experience and correct behaviour in the public space”

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<sup>39</sup> Marina Abramovic’s iconic *Rhythm 0* (1974) exemplifies this focus. Abramovic used the performance to incriminate the audience within the construction of the event, through a direct and perilous engagement. *Rhythm 0* saw Abramovic sitting passively in the Studio Mona Gallery in Naples. Alongside her a table held various objects, including a pair of scissors, a gun, a cigarette and so on (Archer, 2002:106). The audience was then invited to use the items on Abramovic as they saw fit. The performance was eventually called to a halt after Abramovic, having had all her clothing cut from her body, was forced to hold the barrel of a loaded gun in her mouth (Archer, 2002:106). *Rhythm 0* reveals the importance of audience interaction within the production of a performance, where demands of responsibility are placed on the audience, making them complicit in the act itself.

<sup>40</sup> With artist Lauren von Gogh.

(Berghuis, 2004: 2). This included washing our clothes in public fountains, adorning homes with 'kitsch' wall plaques, holding public noodle-tossing competitions, and so on. As with Voina, we sought to create a "sincere and honest and... emotional experience" through our art-making, where the public had free and direct access to the performance 'act' (Voina, 2010). The documentation, if any, was very much 'documentary' in style – the intention: to create a sense of the context, a record of "as much of the total visual experience of [the] actual performance as possible" (Argelander in Lambert-Beatty, 2005:114). Influenced by Jon Erickson's statement that "there is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white, which points to the idea that documentation really is only a supplement to the performance... of which the photograph is primarily a reminder," we confined ourselves exclusively to black-and-white documentation (Erickson, 1999: 98).

*Blood Elevator* (2006) typifies the paradigms inherent within this early practice. The performance saw us staging a blood nose in the confined space of a high-end shopping mall elevator. Over a period of 6 hours, I rode the lift, holding an ineffectual tissue to my 'bleeding' nose, 'blood' dripping onto the floor and down my arms (see plate 19). The reaction from the public was extreme: a number of people refused to ride the elevator, most stood pressed up against the opposite side of the lift. The performance attempted to highlight the acute climate of fear surrounding bodily fluids and contamination, where, in 2006, 10.9% of the South African population was HIV positive<sup>41</sup> (AVERT: 2010). The confrontation with the audience was aggressive: our intention to

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<sup>41</sup> This statistic comes from the National HIV Census in 2008.

“violate borders” between private and public life, and by extension, “between everyday life and art” (Goldberg 2004: 31).

In keeping with the ‘requirements’ of ‘traditional’ performance art identified in chapter one, the performance was focused on both the ‘live-ness’ of the ‘act,’ and the “collaborative participation of the audience” (Auslander, 2005: 27). In line with Baker’s *Official BB Leaf Project*, rather than a performance “lifted out... from its contextual surroundings,” where the performer is understood to be ‘on,’ *Blood Elevator* focused on the creation of “specific sociability,” and one-on-one encounters (Bauman in Auslander, 2005: 27 and Bourriaud, 2002: 16). However, unlike Baker’s ‘quiet acts,’ the situation posed was “disconcerting”; an uncomfortable violation of and encroachment into the integrity of the viewers’ space (Schneeman, 1980: 12).



Plate 19: Sober&Lonely, *Blood Elevator*, 2005

The documentation of the performance, one of the few acts we decided to document, confined itself to a “homemade hit-or-miss amateurish” aesthetic, implicating itself as ‘authentic’ documentation (Taylor, 2005: 223). The covertly taken black-and-white ‘snapshots’ frame both the context, and the interaction, or lack thereof, between myself as the ‘performer’ and the public as the ‘audience.’ Thus, in line with the requirements for ‘documentary’ style documentation, the image “is not *creative*,” where it is in anyway considered; it is merely “a visual record,” there to “refresh the memory of the live performance” (Argelander: 1974: 51).

However, this methodology, in hindsight, was largely idealistic. Despite our “utopian efforts” to avoid creating ‘artworks,’ the low quality videos and stills were often disappointing and seemed to disrupt the concept more than enhance it<sup>42</sup> (Borčić, 2010: 2). While ‘traditionalist’ Argelander argues that “ideal” documentation removes any “aesthetic orientation,” thus avoiding the possibility that the performance might be “misrepresented,” the opposite in fact seemed true (Argelander, 1974: 51). Much of the documentation, as in *Blood Elevator*, appeared obscure and ambiguous. Auslander points out in this regard, that just because an image “*looks* documentary” doesn’t mean the performance is accurately represented or captured (Auslander, 2005: 22).

Mangolte highlights the fact that despite all attempts at objectivity and non-aestheticisation, the lens always has a mediating effect on a performance: shutter-speed, angle, the use of black-and-white film, and so on, intentionally

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<sup>42</sup> Poschl states in this regard that the “contempt” of an aesthetic focus in the documentation process often has “a negative effect on [the] work” where the “actions lose greatly in effect” (Poschl 2005: 85).

or unintentionally highlight and subvert aspects of the performance being documented (Mangolte, 2005: 48). As such, we became aware of the “myth” of ‘authentic’ documentation, where through contriving a nonchalant ‘*authenticity*,’ the images simply bolster the presumption of photography as able to “represent a direct experience, the truth, or an unambiguous ‘*that’s how it is*’” (Clausen, 2004: 10).

Furthermore, despite our hierarchical focus on the ‘live-ness’ of the act over that of the ‘end product,’ we had to acknowledge that our ‘audience,’ in reality, was far greater “after the act” (Clausen, 2005). The focus on ‘documentary’ images as a mere addendum or ‘sidekick’ to the ‘live-act,’ was based, in retrospect, on a “naïve belief” in the ability of performance art to exist outside of “the functions of the system of art and market mechanisms” (Borčić, 2010: 2). In truth, we wanted our work to be *seen*, to be acknowledged and understood by more than just the few passers-by that happened upon our interventions. Jonas reports a similar conclusion: when asked by critic Karin Schneider about her shift from ‘live-ness’ to recordings, Jonas states candidly: “The answer is very simple: I want my work to be seen... I do performances and I put a lot of effort into my work... the gallery is simply a place where people can see my work, I like having my work on display for a period of time” (Jonas in Schneider, 2010). Clausen points out that, despite an altruistic intent, performance art “cannot begin and end with the authentic experience,” but rather should “be understood as an ongoing process of an interdependent relationship between event, medialization and reception” (Clausen, 2005: 7).

*Calla-Nightwatch* (2007) marked a turning point in this regard. The original performance saw me standing on a dark road, dressed in stereotypical ‘office-worker’ garb, holding a butcher’s knife, attempting to hitch a lift from passers-by. My androgynous appearance, bottle-bottom spectacles and curiously outdated clothing, as well as the large knife, heralded ‘Calla’ as a man not to be trusted. The performance attempted to highlight, in a farcical way, the clichés around hitchhikers and the engendered fear of the ‘stranger-danger’<sup>43</sup>. The name ‘Calla,’ borrowed from a fictional character Calla Jones – a man falsely accused of murder in the romance novel *A Hero’s Redemption* by Suzanne McMinn, refers to the error of assumption based on appearance. Standing on the Melville Bridge in Johannesburg, attempting to ‘hitch a ride,’ I was given a wide berth, with pedestrians crossing the road to avoid the protagonist. On reviewing the documentation of ‘Calla’s’ attempt at hitchhiking – no one picked him up – we were unhappy with the quality of the documentation. The images taken under a broken streetlight were so dark as to be almost illegible; further, we hadn’t managed to capture any of the avoidant passers-by or speeding vehicles.

We decided to restage the act in order to try and achieve a ‘good shot,’ one that represented the concept of the act, rather than simply document the ‘reality’ of the performance. We shifted the location to an area with adequate lighting and the correct degree of suburban predictability, and performed solely for the camera. In contriving the documentation of the performance, we created a sense, not so much of the reality of the act as an “interactional

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<sup>43</sup> The term ‘stranger danger’ has become a common epithet for the perceived danger presented by strangers: “the phrase is intended to sum up the danger associated with the malevolent threat presented by unknown adults” (Wikipedia, 2011)

accomplishment,” but rather as a concise narrative statement of our concept (Bauman in Auslander, 2005: 27). With knife in hand, and self-consciously bad drag, the resulting aesthetic is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, and although not our initial intention, the photograph bears a strong ‘Sherman-esque’ feel to it<sup>44</sup> (see plate 20).



Plate 20: Sober&Lonely, *Calla-Nightwatch*, 2007

Following this early exploration into ‘theatrical’ performance, and a relinquishment of the ‘requirements’ tied to ‘traditional’ performance art and documentation, Sober&Lonely began a series of staged works engaging with

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<sup>44</sup> Sherman explains that for her *Untitled Film Stills* series: “I liked the Hitchcock look... what I was interested in was when [the actors] were almost expressionless...I knew that if I acted too happy, too sad or scared – if the emotional quotient was too high – the photography would seem campy” (Sherman, 1989).

the concept of quiet acts of violence. Embodying specific “prototypical creeps,” as with Calla, we assumed a “sense of empowerment and a darker acting-out of vulnerability, real or imaged” (Brodie, 2008: 4) The performances, along with each ‘outcome,’ were pre-planned, with consideration given to lighting, camera angle, costume and so on. As with Baker’s *The Blue Collar Girl*, the acts were still undertaken in the public domain. However, the documentation was “destined to be [a] final outcome,” not merely a by-product, or addendum, to an action that has now passed (Cotton, 2007: 8).

Critic Cara Snyman describes one of the images, *The Wanker*:

The Wanker is an almost diametrically opposed treatment of the alter-ego. Here, one half of this all-female duo gets into character, a la Cindy Sherman. Koki-drawn hair covers the ‘Wanker’s’ exposed thighs as he looks out of the half open car window, we presume lecherously. The moustache and glasses are just as fake as the hair, an obvious disguise. He has that seventies-look sported by SA security personnel well into the nineties, and most importantly: the shape of [his] penis is visible through his white underpants.

(Snyman, 2008)

The image was based on a series of incidents where I was ‘flashed’<sup>45</sup>, while walking my dogs at a notorious ‘pick-up’ zone at Emmarentia Dam, Johannesburg. The location was that of the original incident, but the final image as a document of the act is a single mid-shot, devoid of any greater context. We then digitally enhanced the still – creating the focal point of the startlingly white underwear, and enhancing the shadow effect in the texture of the jacket and car seats. We converted the image to black-and-white, contriving a ‘documentary’ feel to the ‘snapshot,’ playing up the “myth” of ‘authentic’ documentation (Clausen, 2004: 10). The resulting image became, what Mangolte pejoratively terms, an “art-logo,” meant only for display in a gallery (Mangolte, 2005:44) (see plate 21).

Both *Calla-Nightwatch* and *The Wanker* mark a shift in focus from ‘authentic’ documentation of a live-act, to the creation of a specific degree of performativity within the controlled frame of a still image. Influenced by Susan Sontag, I began to view the camera as a device to make “reality atomic, manageable, and opaque” (Sontag, 1989: 23). As with Baker’s work, the narrative statement thus becomes a key mechanism within this evolution; where the function of photographic documentation shifts from an object understood as ‘authentic’ evidence of an act, to a “negotiation between the events depicted, the photographer’s intention, and the viewer’s interpretation” (O’Reilly, 2007: 5).

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<sup>45</sup> The term ‘flasher’ is the more common term for *apodysoiphilia* a “psychological need and pattern of behavior involving the exposure of parts of the body to another person with a tendency toward an extravagant, usually at least partially sexually inspired behavior” (Oxford Dictionary: 1970)



Plate 21: Sober&Lonely, *The Wanker*, 2007

Within this shift, the aggressive 'egalitarian' focus of our early work seemed increasingly naïve and self-interested. While many of the acts succeeded in provoking a response from the audience, they felt uncomfortably moralistic, refusing any exchange or contestation (Bishop, 2004: 54). In line with 'Relational Aesthetics,' we experienced a "shift in attitude toward social change," where "instead of trying to change [the] environment" we simply posed questions on how we *might* "inhabit the world in a better way" (Bishop, 2004: 54). As such, through the creation of images, the performances are opened up to be 'read,' where the events preceding and following the act rely on the interpretation of the viewer. The move toward 'theatrical' performance thus located my focus away from the didacticism of 'traditional' performance art and documentation, toward the creation of "interactivity" (Bourriaud, 2002: 24).

### **The Dilemma of Documentation**

Within this shift, however, I became increasingly aware of the definitional problematics surrounding performance art, and performance documentation, with the "blind spots" and "contradictions" explored in chapter two presenting themselves in practice (Clausen, 2005: 223). The presentation of photographs and videos by myself as a *performance artist* were received, more often than not, with confusion and ambivalence. As mentioned in my introduction, a number of the foremost contemporary South African art competitions, including Absa L'Atelier, stipulate outright that "no performance art will be accepted" (Absa L'Atelier Art Competition, 2011). However, the competition

allows for video and photography, the deduction being that the ‘traditional’ understanding of performance art as a *live-spectacle* is still very much the point of reference for performance art within a contemporary South African context.

To return to a statement evidenced in chapter one: “performance’s only life is in the present... it cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulations of representations of representations, once it does it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan, 1993: 146), it appears that the cut and dry conditions within these competitions seem to reiterate this same archaic, ‘traditionalist’ definition of performance art by Phelan, this despite the requirements of audience interaction and ‘live-ness’ within performance art being challenged by artists such as Yves Klein and Bruce Nauman from as early as the 1960s.

Furthermore, as my ‘theatrical’ performances became increasingly ‘polished’ in their final outcome, the work was often termed ‘photographic portraiture.’ Cindy Sherman<sup>46</sup> is similarly often referred to under the banner of ‘portrait photographer’ – this despite her vehement declaration that her work is “not art photography” (Dorfman, 1984: 13). As discussed in chapter three, the resistance to *allowing* performance art to be termed as such, when it has an aesthetic focus, seemed an equally difficult position to navigate within the (re)presentation of my own performances.

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<sup>46</sup> Burnham pejoratively refers to the use of stagings and disguise in performance art, as with Sherman, Baker and myself’s work as an “idiotic-cabaret-TV-parody mode” (Burnham, 1986: 45).

## **Girl, you know it's true**

In 2009, in response to these frustrating definitional dilemmas, I began work on *Girl, you know it's true* – a solo project under the pseudonym Carmen Sober, exploring both the relationship between performance art and performance documentation, as well as the shifting definition of performance art from the 'traditional' understanding of the medium, toward a definition within Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics.' This new body of work formed my Masters exhibition and the Brait-Everard Award show at the Circa Gallery, Johannesburg in July 2010.

*Girl, you know it's true* is a multi-disciplinary body of work encompassing live performance, 'theatrical' performance and a series of 'performance activations.' The explicit subject matter for the show derives from a series of urban legends, an extension of the narrative constructs from my previous work, and a parallel discourse on belief structures. The title of the exhibition *Girl, you know it's true* is taken from the 'hoax' hit single by pop-duo Milli Vanilli<sup>47</sup>, and directly points to the idea that 'live-ness,' representation and (re)presentation, are not always as they seem. Each 'section' attempts to engage with a specific problematic identified within the course of this research paper. Across the different spectrums, it is the centrality of the human figure that "connects the work to the past thirty years of performance art" (Taylor, 2005: 223).

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<sup>47</sup> In 1988 the single peaked at No. 3 and No. 2 in the UK and USA charts, respectively (Roth, 1990). In 1989, during a supposedly live-performance, the duo were revealed lip-synching to a recording of the song when it skipped repeatedly. What followed was a widely publicised scandal exposing the duo as a cleverly staged hoax. Milli Vanilli, along with their record company, were fraudulently misrepresenting themselves as the recorded artists<sup>47</sup> (Roth, 1990).

The project began with a series of performed photographs and videos<sup>48</sup>. In line with Auslander's definition of 'theatrical' performance, the images were "staged solely to be recorded by one means or another, and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences" (Auslander, 2005: 23). Despite no audience being present, the work falls very much in line with Bourriaud's "participatory model," where the sphere of sociability occurs within the process of "invitations, casting sessions [and] meetings[, etc.]" (Bourriaud, 2002: 13 and 47). Thus, the work engages with performance and performativity on two levels: firstly as a moving body captured in space, where the camera acts as a "reified replacement for presence" (Bourriaud, 2002: 75); and secondly through the creation of "social exchanges, interactivity... and various communication processes" (Bourriaud, 2002: 43), where the success of the work lies in the beholder's engagement with the work (Bourriaud, 2002: 82), and the "originality and audacity of [its] conception and execution" (Auslander, 2005: 27).

I began the process by approaching a number of friends and colleagues, asking them to identify an urban legend they had heard, or had been affected by in some way. The process in itself represents a move into a democratic space for exchange, where "inter-subjectivity and interaction" become "informers" of "interactivity" (Bourriaud, 2002: 43). As such, each individual *chose* the subject matter, and furthermore, *chose* to participate in the act,

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<sup>48</sup> In order to avoid 'cataloguing' the show, I will not discuss all of the works from *Girl, you know it's true*.

rather than having it foisted upon them as in my earlier 'traditional' performance work.

As the focus was on creating specific exchanges on a subjective level, I made the decision to move away from my own bodily presence, embracing the role of art-director in *collaboration* with specific individuals. My role thus shifted to that of 'orchestrator of events,' where the "planning and arranging [of] the body in space – both in terms of its function in space and its managing of space," (Berghuis, 2006: 2) became the salient focus in the construction of the performances.

Each of the videos and photographs thus saw the identification of a specific urban legend in collaboration with a specific individual. I then planned and designed each element as I would a photo-shoot, with costumes, props, lighting and so on. I further identified a specific set of contrivances within the documentation procedure, attempting to highlight the 'myth' of 'authentic' documentation as being able to 'capture' the "reality of the performance," a "piece of the real world" (Auslander, 2002: 22). In line with Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*, the images thus present themselves as 'authentic,' despite the overtly absurd subject matter.

*Puppy* began with a discussion with Renee Stewart who was interested in participating in the project. Stewart told me a seemingly improbable anecdote she had heard, whereby a woman had attempted to dry her freshly groomed poodle by popping it into the microwave for a few seconds, to explosive

results. Snopes<sup>49</sup> reports a variant on the story:

A rich elderly lady from Harrogate was taking her pet poodle for a walk when they were caught in a downpour. Rushing back inside, fretful for her pampered pet, she was desperate to dry him out and warm him up as soon as possible. So she took him straight to the kitchen, opened the door of her daughter's new microwave cooker for the first time and thrust him in, moving the dial to a moderate setting. She patted his head and closed the door with a click.

The old lady was still drying her hair when the dog exploded, ripping the door off the microwave.

(Healey and Glanville in Snopes, 2010)

Stewart's particular story has its origins in the 1970s when microwave ovens were becoming increasingly popular (Snopes, 2010). The legend, typically, uses the story as a warning; in this case a cautionary tale against an unquestioning faith in 'new technology.'

In collaboration with Stewart, I developed a short pre-production script for the performance:

Stumbling into her kitchen on hearing a loud BANG!, Andrea

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<sup>49</sup> Snopes is a website dedicated to "urban legends, folklore, myths, rumours, and misinformation" (Snopes, 2011).

Dauids opens her new microwave oven (recently released in South Africa) to discover her poodle, Gypsy, had exploded. The belief that the dog would simply 'dry-off' proved misguided.

We performed the 'act' in my kitchen, where the outdated 1970s tiles created a sense of the period of the origins of the performance. The other props include sourced items like an original 1970s peg holder, cropped off to the right of the image, and a replica 1970s shirt. Stewart then performed to the camera, re-enacting what the 'woman' might have experienced on opening the microwave door to find a pulpy mass of dog (a stuffed toy and gizzards) inside (see plate 22).



Plate 22: Carmen Sober, in collaboration with Renee Stewart, *Puppy*, 2010

In post-production, I chose a slightly blurry image, one that contrives the impression that the event was 'caught' on camera. I converted the image to black-and-white and printed it on standard 8" x 12" photographic paper, with a white border. The printing technique and style of the image emulate photographs of the period and enhance its appearance of 'authenticity.' The image produces a paradox, a highly unlikely scenario that just 'happens' to be caught on camera at exactly the right moment.

For *Fence* I developed a pre-production 'script' with my long-time collaborator, Lauren von Gogh. The script read as follows:

The body of a 3ft tall, 3 eyed, fork tailed creature was discovered by a Mrs Naylor of the Bluff, Durban, in the early hours of the morning. The family quickly photographed the creature and phoned the police. However when the police got there [it] had mysteriously disappeared.

The image is based on a number of popular urban legend and hoax photographs featuring 'evidence' of mermaids, big-foot and so on (Snopes, 2006). *Fence* deliberately plays on the usually 'de-skilled' style of this photographic typology, where the subject of the image is always conveniently slightly out of focus, captured at a distance, or pixelated (Dalton, 2000:47). I constructed the 'creature' out of papier-mâché, and then 'captured' von Gogh in a series of hurried and spontaneous actions, resulting in the 'badly-cropped' position of 'Mrs Naylor's' head. The gruesome features of the character were

then digitally added in post-production. The final image (as with *Puppy*) was printed on standard 8" x 12", on glossy paper, enforcing its reading as a 'genuine' photograph (see plate 23).



Plate 23: Carmen Sober, in collaboration with Lauren von Gogh, *Fence*, 2010

The performed photographs and videos, including *Beehive* (in collaboration with Candida Pestana), *Magic* (in collaboration with Dave Newton) and *Pencil* (in collaboration with Sheldon Munsami) all followed a similar format; namely the creation of participatory acts and interactivity through the collaboration with specific people. In each case, it is the staging of bodies that tie the work to performance art, where the actions simply occur within a space created by the camera (Bourriaud, 2002: 76). Through contriving various semiotic features of 'documentary' style documentation – press style photography for

*Pencil*, evidentiary style photography for *Beehive*, and so on – the intention was to counter the misleading premise of documentation as being representationally accurate and ontologically connected to ‘the real world’ (Cotton, 2007: 8 and Auslander, 2005: 22). Thus, while Mangolte might argue that a focus on aestheticisation results in “slickness instead of authenticity,” ‘authenticity’ seems equally contrived, as evidenced in chapter two, where images are taken for granted as being ‘real’ through specific semiotic characteristics, whether they are, in fact, true or not (Mangolte, 2005: 48).

My exploration of the dilemma of ‘authenticity’ in documentation played out, in practice, after the exhibition. *Trademark*, created in collaboration with my colleague, Clint Griffin, developed a fresh take on the conspiracy theories often surrounding prominent corporate logos. In *The Rabbit in the Thorn Tree – Modern Myths and Urban Legends of South Africa*, author Arthur Goldstuck writes:

On 30 September 1987, Barclays Bank, the largest financial institution in [South Africa], formally changed its name to First National Bank... the name change was preceded by a media campaign that cost R45-million spent on advertising, promotional material and, in particular, a new logo. The bank decided on a very simple logo... featuring a thorn tree, silhouetted against a rising sun.... By coincidence the branches of the tree formed the shape of a near perfect outline of the continent of Africa.... Some sharp-eyed individuals spotted

another coincidence: the shape of a leaping rabbit in the branches.

(Goldstuck, 1990: 10)

The 'rabbit' was a then popular symbol of the African National Congress (ANC) (Goldstuck, 1990: 10). Alongside the rabbit, a rifle and crocodile were also supposedly 'visible'<sup>50</sup>. With both of us working in the advertising industries, the legend was close to home. As such, we developed a concept to engage with the bureaucratic headaches surrounding logo development in a farcical way. *Trademark*, shows Griffin evangelically posturing in front of a 'tweaked' Unilever<sup>51</sup> logo projected on an overhead screen. One of the symbols forming the logo appears, on closer inspection, to be a pentagram; a symbol often used in "mysticism and the occult" (Fowler: 1970). There is ambivalence as to whether Griffin is accusing or defending the logo (see plate 24).

The image was printed alongside a brief review of the show in the *Mail & Guardian* (February 2011). While certain signifiers enhance the 'authentic' nature of the 35mm slide – the awkward 'snap-shot' angle, the grainy black-and-white texture, and so on – the theatricality destabilises its factuality, pointing to the "ontological confusion of photography" (O'Reilly, 2007: 6). Within the context of the exhibition, the image is contrived enough for the

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<sup>50</sup> The bank shortly thereafter redesigned its logo and published a full-page ad in every mass circulation newspaper stating: "although people have appeared to have found some 6 or 7 shapes there was no deliberate insertion of any of the shapes in the tree...we do not support the ANC...we are not the 'ANC bank'" (Goldstuck, 1990: 13).

<sup>51</sup> Unilever is an Anglo-Dutch multinational corporation that owns many of the world's consumer product brands in foods, beverages, cleaning agents and personal care products (Wikipedia, 2010). Both Griffin and myself have worked on the brand for a number of years.

viewer to realise that it is a choreographed event functioning as an allegory (Cotton, 2007: 51). However, despite the obvious absurdity of the image, and despite the ‘disclaimer’ in the paper that the exhibition explored “falsehood, fraud, lies and deception... that society can’t stop swallowing to the point of engorgement” the image was taken as ‘authentic’ (Sudheim, 2011). A few days after the publication, I received an email from the public relations department at Unilever asking “who is the man in the image?” and “where was the image taken?”, followed by a reproachful lawyer’s letter<sup>52</sup>. Clearly the contrived ‘authenticity’ had proved convincing.



Plate 24: Carmen Sober, in collaboration with Clint Griffin, *Trademark*, 2010 (35mm projection)

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<sup>52</sup> In the letter I was thanked for my explanation “that the photograph is not a real photograph but rather one which has been constructed by you as a response to an ‘urban legend’ to the effect that a Unilever CEO was involved in witchcraft”. I was asked to avoid any further publication of the image in that it might damage the Unilever reputation and “mislead our consumers into believing that the ‘urban legend’ holds some truth”.

As part of the interactive aspect to the work, each of the images was later distributed via the Internet on a website called 'Explain this Image'<sup>53</sup>, (www.explainthisimage.com). The website asks people to rate the images from 1 to 5 depending on its WTF<sup>54</sup>? status. As such, and in line with Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics', I attempted to locate my practice within "the culture at large," where a "community" was able to engage with, and critique each image, as well as publish, format and distribute the work as they saw fit. Removed from an exhibition context, the images take on a life of their own, where the 'authenticity' of the imagery becomes further open to misinterpretation.

For *Miracle*, I moved into the exploration of performativity through sound. I developed a set of lyrics surrounding an email hoax reporting that unreleased material from the black-box of Alaskan Airlines flight 261 showed that during the final minutes before its crash, a miracle occurred. It claimed that despite all the odds, the plane managed to stay in the air for 9 minutes before it plunged into the Pacific Ocean. According to the report, the voices of two missionaries aboard the plane could be heard leading the panicked passengers in prayer for their salvation (Snopes: 2000).

I wrote the following lyrics, and then worked with musician, Portia Malunga, to create a gospel style sound:

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<sup>53</sup> The website is dedicated to "pictures that simply make no sense," that have left people saying "wtf?" (explainthisimage, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Abbreviation for the common internet slang 'what-the-fuck'.

In-flight service has stopped  
From the wing a loud banging noise  
The yellow masks have dropped  
Flight attendant's pretence of poise

Flight 261 you're going down  
We were heading toward the town

Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah  
(Chorus)

The Pilot says to all stay calm  
The in-flight stabilisers gone

Chorus

Pacific ocean just below  
The plane is shaking with vibration  
Emergency procedures grow  
From flight 261 salvation

Chorus

The final 'black-box recording' had added elements of 'authenticity,' including a baby crying (Malunga's daughter) and a 'radio' type haze. The work was at once eerie and ridiculous. The carefully thought out lyrics and catchy gospel tune at such a moment of crisis point to the improbability of the act. The final sound was attached to found footage of a woman engulfed in terror on a plane. The duplicitous nature of the work, in its implausible lyrics, contrived black-box sounds and genuine footage, created a complex dialectic within the work (see plate 25).



Plate 25: Carmen Sober, in collaboration with Portia Malunga, *Miracle*, 2010 (screen shot)

The performed photographs and videos within *Girl, you know it's true*, thus attempt to challenge directly the 'traditional' requirements of both the 'liveness' of a performance, as well as the myth of 'authenticity' in documentation.

Despite artists such as Sherman, Jonas and Klein challenging archaic 'traditionalist' definitions, the antagonism facing performed photography and 'theatrical' performance still rages on. As recently as 2004, the "After the Act" symposium was held<sup>55</sup> with various performance art heavyweights present, including Auslander, presenting 'On the Performativity of Performance Documentation,' attempting to unpack the ongoing problematic relationship between performance art and documentation. I would hope that, in response to these sorts of discussions, *Girl, you know it's true*, will spark a questioning of the 'traditional' 'hero:sidekick' role between performance art and performance documentation. And further, however 'microcosmic' it might be, that the exhibition articulately positions 'theatrical' performance as a legitimate form of performance art in its own right, where it is "the act of documenting an event as a performance" that frames it as such (Auslander, 2005: 7).

However, within the context of both the exhibition and this research paper, I wanted to push the boundaries of performance art one step further from 'theatrical' performance. Reiterating my position that performance art can be defined through the inter-human relations it represents, produces or prompts, I wanted to explore the creation of performance art as mediated by a 'document,' rather than myself as either the 'performer' or 'art director.' Through a series of 'performance activations,' I attempted to remove any means of accessing 'the body' through either 'live-ness' or documentation. As such, the performance exists purely within the realm of inter-human relations.

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<sup>55</sup> The symposium took place in October 2004 at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) in Vienna, Germany.

## **Girl, you know it's true and Performance Activations**

The term 'performance activations' derives from my work in advertising, where a large proportion of my work is in the creation of 'brand activations'; that being the development of strategies and executions through live interactions that encourage consumers to interact with a specific brand. Interestingly, the term has much in common with 'Relational Aesthetics', where the focus is on creating "live consumer interactions and engagements" (OgilvyAction, 2011).

As such, I developed two projects, *Banana* and *Hook*, each attempting to encourage a specific "connection" and collaborative encounter, completely outside of any conventional performance 'space' ('traditional' or 'theatrical') (Bourriaud, 2002: 29). Thus, while the photographs and videos for *Girl, you know it's true* were marked and created through structured meetings and collaborations, and a resulting 'capture' of the performance, the 'performance activations' sought to create and prompt encounters within a different temporal structure; that of the 'receiver's' own determinations, and resulting actions or 'acts.'

*Banana I* and *II* attempted to create a multi-part connection for the viewer at the gallery. On arriving at Circa, the audience was offered a fresh banana from a platter, the only food on offer at the opening, refilled from a conspicuous import crate. Each fruit, on closer inspection, had a small 'brand' sticker attached: "Imported from Costa Rica" (*Banana I*). On entering the gallery, the works were positioned so that *Banana II* was the last work to be

encountered. As such, after eating the snack, the audience would ‘happen’ upon the counterpoint to the first ‘work’ – an ‘authentic’ article from the *Daily Sun*. The lead feature, entitled ‘Flesh Eating Bananas!’, describes the spread of *necrotising fasciitis* through imported fruit. The article, complete with a gruesome image of the results of the flesh-eating disease, was based on an email hoax I had received earlier in the year, warning that I shouldn’t eat bananas for the next six weeks, by order of the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention. The work thus attempted to create an ‘action’ – a sense of perhaps shock, nausea or amusement – through the unwitting collaboration of the audience (see plate 26). Von Gogh reports:

I helped myself to a banana, initially pleased with what I guessed was a healthy approach to exhibition catering. I wandered around the show some more while tucking into the free food. Standing in front of a neatly framed front page of the *Daily Sun*, it took me a couple of seconds to make the connection between my snack and this work. The headline read, ‘*FLESH EATING BANANAS. Three Dead After Eating Killer Fruit.*’ Nobody else was eating the fruit on offer and I am not sure whether it was out of some kind of paranoid fear, or merely exhibition etiquette.

(Von Gogh, 2010)



Plate 26: Carmen Sober, *Banana I and II*, 2010

For *Hook*, I attempted to shift an ‘encounter’ completely away from the gallery space, to a collaboration that might or might not occur, might be responded to, or not. While the audience was in the gallery, I slipped a ‘handwritten’ note under the windshield wiper of each of the parked cars, stating: “I saw you drop a R200 note... call me I’ll come drop it off at your house – 0793479908. Love Cedric” (see plate 27).



I saw you drop a R200 note...call  
me I'll come drop it off at your  
house - 0793479908  
Love Cedric

Plate 27: Carmen Sober, *Hook*, 2010

The name 'Cedric' was borrowed from the infamous Wemmer Pan serial killer, Cedrik Maake (Wikipedia, 2010). The work plays on numerous urban legends, including that of an email hoax, warning women about a serial killer luring his victims with a 'dropped' bill (Snopes, 2011). The 'performance activation' sought to leave the audience with a chilling, if somewhat absurd, take-home reminder of the exhibition, and encourage an 'action,' a performance 'act,' from their side. The quantitative results, in the form of text and voicemail messages, saw a range of sentiments:

Hi Cedric. Thank you for your note about the money I dropped at E Read on Thursday. Have tried to phone a no. of times with no success. If you send me an sms when you are available I will phone again. Thanks for your trouble. Reshada.

**Sender:**

**+27833756171**

Hi Cedric, it couldn't hav bn me who th R200, bt thank anyway. Janine

**Sender:**

**+27824904768**

Haha that must be the funniest pick up line I have ever come across!...A R200 note! !

Very original.

**Sender:**

**+277832671732**

Keep the 200, u need it!

**Sender:**

**+27836055862**

Von Gogh writes on her encounter with *Hook*:

Arriving back at my car, with memories of photographs and videos fading, I found a handwritten note under my windscreen. The author said they had found a R200 note at my car. There was a phone number I could call to retrieve my money. After a couple of minutes I realised it was naïve thinking I could score R200... I looked around to see that each windscreen had the same note attached, and I quietly chuckled to myself.

(Von Gogh, 2010)

The work for *Girl, you know it's true* has attempted to disrupt the ideological imperatives of 'traditional' performance art identified in this research paper.

Von Gogh writes:

Sober's exploration of urban legends comes to serve as a mere tool in the research around notions of performativity and different possibilities in executing and documenting contemporary performance art.

(Von Gogh, 2010)

Within the exhibition, and within the context of this research paper, I have thus attempted to set a problem for the viewer on two levels: firstly, to question the authenticity of documentation, and secondly, a deeper strategy where the viewer is expected to "unravel the conceptual strategies of each [work] testing whether they fit into performance studies or more mainstream analysis of popular culture" (Goldberg, 2001: 226). I would hope, as a possible resolution to these questions, that my exhibition represents performance art as a reflexive medium, and a means of interactive collaboration where performance is defined on the basis of the "sphere of human relations" which are represented, prompted or produced, rather than purely as a 'live-spectacle' (Bourriaud in Smith, 2006: 3) (see plates 28 to 38).



Plate 28: *Girl, you know it's true*, Circa Gallery, July 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 29: *Girl, you know it's true*, Circa Gallery, July 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 30: Installation – *Magic*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 31: Installation – *Pencil and Puppy*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 32: Installation – *Pain and Seed*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 33: Installation – *Trademark*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 34: Installation – *Pain*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 35: Installation – *Seed and Magic*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)

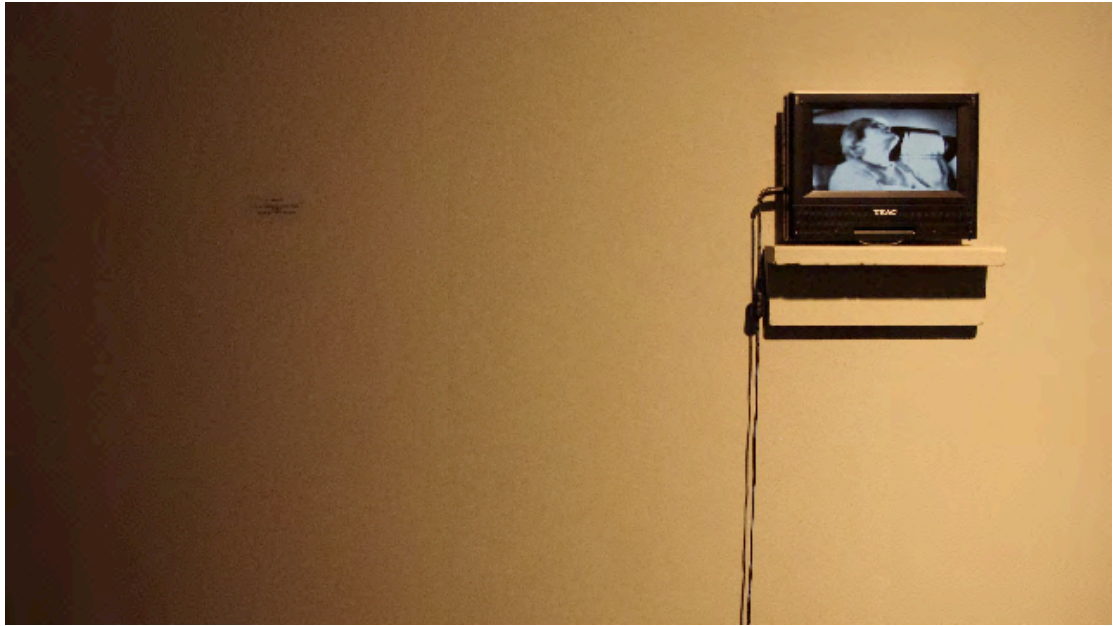


Plate 36: Installation – *Miracle*, 2010 (image courtesy of Leigh-Anne Jenks)



Plate 37: *Girl, you know it's true*, Circa Gallery, July 2010



Plate 38: Exterior – Circa Gallery on Jellicoe, Johannesburg, July 2010

## Conclusion

Within the scope of this research paper, and in line with recent symposiums, such as *After the Act* (2005) and *Convivencia*<sup>56</sup> (2007), I have explored the paradoxical paradigms inherent within the relationship between performance art and its (re)presentation through documentation. The “mutual relationship between performativity and mediality” is still very much a topic of contention, with ‘traditionalists’ insisting that the documentation of a performance ‘should’ be there only in the capacity as “a spur to memory” (Phelan, 1993: 146).

In his presentation to *Convivencia*, Stapleton writes:

Historically, performance documentation has commonly been characterised as an unfaithful representation of the ephemeral art experience. However, in recent years the relationship between documentation and live performance practices has moved towards reconciliation. The reasons for such a shift are many, possibly including the validation of practice-led research, the use of new technologies within performance, anxieties over disappearing legacies, and/or the wider acceptance of the value of mediated memories. Yet not all are encouraged by the... increasing demands for reproducible evidence. The role that documentation plays in the recording of performance continues

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<sup>56</sup> A one-day symposium on existing and potential relationships between documentation and live art practices held at UCLan.

to be described as negative or destructive towards the knowledges embodied in live events.

(Stapleton, 2007)

While artists such as Sherman, Nauman and Klein, to name but a few, have been exploring performances removed from the 'requirements' of traditional performance art from as early as the 1960s, the medium still seems frustratingly tied to what has essentially become a clichéd parody of an initially permissive art form (Jonas in Hoffman, 2005: 5). As a medium described by Goldberg as the "avant avant garde," the fences around 'authentic' performance art and performance documentation seems in contradiction to its initially permissive character (Goldberg, 2001: 9). While 'traditionalists' such as McMahon continue to define performance art based on "time and space" which is "experienced, not represented [where the] performer and audience experience the process simultaneously," the strategy seems fraught with "contradictions... and blind spots" (Clausen, 2005: 223), one of which being performance art's dependence on documentation "to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture" (Jones in Auslander, 2005: 25).

As such, and within the scope of this essay, I have attempted to renegotiate the relationship between performance art and performance documentation. I have evidenced that the 'requirements' of 'traditional' performance art – namely the 'live-ness of the act, audience interaction and a rejection of the 'art-object' – stem from a directly anti-Modernist genealogy. I have shown that this same set of criteria has insisted upon an anti-commodification focus,

where documentation is seen as “antithetical to the ideal... almost a violation” of performance art’s anti-establishment roots (Burnham, 1986: 15).

Through Bourriaud’s ‘Relational Aesthetics’ and Auslander’s theory on ‘theatrical’ performance, I have attempted to renegotiate a less autocratic and anachronistic definition of the medium. Within this methodology, I have explored performance art as an interstice for the creation of ‘interactivity.’ As such, the medium becomes defined through the inter-human relations represented, prompted or produced by the “artistic proposition,” rather than simply the ‘live-ness’ of the act (Bourriaud, 2002: 21, 33 and Bourriaud in Smith, 2006: 3). Following from this, documentation – be it video, photograph, text or other – simply becomes a means to formalise the project, a way to render these “human-relations” concrete (Bourriaud, 2002: 48).

Through various examples of ‘theatrical performance,’ including my own exhibition *Girl, you know its true*, I have attempted to illustrate various avenues of possibility within the field of ‘theatrical’ performance. Within a less teleological definition of the medium, performance art is thus opened up to dynamic new areas of possibility, where the cut and dry hierarchy of ‘traditional’ performance, of ‘live-ness’ and presence, becomes dismantled, in favour of the creation of interactivity (Dixon, 2007: 2). This distinction is becoming increasingly critical within the current “Digital Age” (Dixon, 2007: 1). Digital transmissions and interactive websites are further challenging the ‘traditional’ hierarchical relationship between the performance as the ‘hero’ and documentation as ‘sidekick,’ or addendum to the act (Dixon, 2007: 1).

The defining thread throughout 'traditional' performance art and 'theatrical' performance art remains commonly focused on the centrality of the human figure. However, within the latter, the figure can be implied, overt, or prompted, rather than 'present' in the traditional sense of the term.

Thus, while 'traditional' performance is still active, as evidenced by Voina, it is by no means the only 'acceptable' approach to the creation of performance art in the ever-evolving scope of communication possibilities. While 'traditionalists' might cling to the basic genealogy of performance art as "live art by artists," by opening the door to more dynamic fields of dissemination, the initial ideology behind performance art – to provoke and challenge, to undermine its precedents and antecedents – is allowed to surface within a contemporary performance practice (Goldberg, 2001: 7).

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