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Aesthetic Distance in the Performing Arts

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(Article begins on next page)

Expression in the Performing Arts

Expression in the Performing Arts

Edited by

Inma Álvarez, Héctor J. Pérez
and Francisca Pérez-Carreño

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Edited by Inma Álvarez, Héctor J. Pérez and Francisca Pérez-Carreño

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AESTHETIC DISTANCE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

ALESSANDRO BERTINETTO

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the challenge launched by (certain conceptions of) performing arts, and especially some recent forms, against the aesthetic conception of art. Some theorists maintain that performing arts cannot be understood in terms of aesthetic experience, aesthetic differentiation and aesthetic distance, because performing arts – and especially the new forms of performing arts – are not primarily based on “works”, but on “events”.

I will argue rather that we still need the concepts of aesthetic differentiation or aesthetic distance to understand art experience in general. It is certainly true that performing arts differ in many ways from non-performing arts. This difference is due especially due to the fact that they involve the audience more directly, sometimes to the extent that the performance engenders a feedback loop, which can blur the roles of artists and beholders. Nonetheless, I will maintain, this feature does not make the notion of “aesthetic distance” obsolete, useless, or mistaken. On the contrary, we still need this notion to properly appreciate and understand performing arts as art.

Performing and non performing arts

In the first place it is useful to think about the general difference between performing and non-performing arts. In a very broad and loose sense one could actually say that every encounter with an artwork is a “performance”. In fact, watching films, attending art exhibitions, reading novels are all real activities that take place in real time. The reader, the spectator, the beholder must do something, must be in some ways active,

in order to have the right experience of the artwork. Hence, in this broad sense, every art experience involves a performing event.

Nonetheless, we do customarily distinguish between performing and non-performing arts. In fact, in a more specific sense, the locution performing arts designates those art forms in which one group of people (the performers) using transitory materials (sounds, actions, bodily movements) “perform live before a second group, i.e., an audience” (Saltz 1997, 119). So the public reading of a book by the author or by an actor in front of an audience falls within the class of performing arts, while the private reading of a book does not.

Dance, theater and live music are typical cases of performing arts. In these cases “not only the audience’s encounter with the artwork is an event, but the work encountered is itself an event” (Saltz 1997, p. 119). A person or a group of people do something on the stage and the audience watch and listen to what happens in front of them. Hence, in performing arts, the aesthetic object, i.e. the object of aesthetic attention, is human behavior: the audience pays aesthetic attention to what human beings do on stage during a certain lapse of time. The aesthetic object is the event, i.e. the live performance of actions. The audience listen to the music or watch the play or the dance that are taking place just in front of them, and this experience is in various degrees an experience of aesthetic satisfaction¹.

New forms of performing arts

The point I will discuss is the following. Today some performing art forms challenge the idea that works are played by some performers in front of an audience who is supposed to experience them aesthetically. I will focus my attention especially on E. Fischer-Lichte’s book *Aesthetik des Performativen*, which until now is, as far as I know, one of the main philosophical attempts to grasp the particular aesthetic character of contemporary performing arts. By maintaining, like other theorists do, that new forms of performing arts (performance art, happenings, recent forms of theatre) radically defy the traditional ways to understand art, she argues that we need a different and new conceptual frame to understand them. The aesthetic conception of art grounded on disinterestedness and distance, she argues, is valid only in the case of a “work”-based art; but performing arts are not art forms based on works, they are based on events. Improvisational art forms as well as performance art and happenings involve, accordingly, a different kind of performativity; one that can not be appreciated from an aesthetic distance. These art forms follow,

as it were, completely different rules.

According to Fischer-Lichte, the performativity at issue in such art forms is the direct production of actions. It does not consist of the expressive or representational accomplishment of semantic and emotional contents previously established and fixed in steady forms by an author or by a composer. The performed actions' aim is not to present to the audience meanings, contents or emotions represented or expressed by those actions. Performed actions do not mean or are referred to something else: they rather mean and are referred to themselves. They are not signifiers for signified meanings that could also be presented otherwise. They mean what they do.

Hence, Fischer-Lichte argues, in performing arts like happenings and performance, the dualistic distinctions between reality and fiction and/or illusion, between nature and culture, event and work collapse. There is no longer a presentation of a fictional story set in a previously written (or somehow produced) work through a real event, happening in real time (the actions performed on stage); on the contrary, we are facing actions that mean what they really are, without any reference to meanings or contents produced before the performative event. They are self-referential.

Moreover, this kind of performativity implies that also the spatial and physical separation between performing artists and audience as well as their social and conceptual distinction disappears, or at least tends to disappear. The audience actively participates in the actions performed. Artists and audience become both interacting performers. Hence the main feature of this kind of performativity is the interaction between artists and audience and between the members of the audience. It is no longer a situation in which one or more artists do something in front of an attending audience. Artists and audience interact and the artistic event is the result of this interaction.

Hence those performing arts are self-referential and auto-poietic:

Performances are self-referential because there is no work to be performed: the actions performed do not present us with semantic or emotional meanings in some ways existing, before the performance, in a previously composed work. The actions performed are the performance's meanings. This fact rules out the possibility that the actions performed by the performers' bodies express or represent meanings and/or emotions. The physicality and the materiality of the performers' bodies and actions exceed their meanings. So, according to Fischer-Lichte, any expressive and symbolic meaning does not matter for the success of the performance as performance.

Performances are auto-poietic events in which a particular feedback

loop occurs. The behaviour and the actions performed by the artists affect the reactions carried out by the spectators. The spectators' responses influence other spectators' reactions and, in turn, affect the subsequent artists' actions. The performing event is referred to itself in the strong sense that it engenders and feeds itself, as it were, from the inside and it is not the actual token of a pre-existing type. Hence it produces itself: in this sense it is auto-poietic.²

Performances as auto-poietic systems

In referring to the performativity of happenings, performances and the like as auto-poietic and based on feedback loops, Fischer-Lichte employs the notion of self-organizational complex-system—originally used by Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana to explain biological systems like the living cells.

A complex system is self-organized and auto-poietic because the system produces the components that, in turn, produce the system, and so on, to the extent that the product of the organization is the living system itself. The system generates its own components as much as its boundary. Hence, "whether a given system is capable of making its own boundary or not is often the most discriminating criterion for recognizing whether a given system is auto-poietic or not (allopoietic)." (Luisi 2003, 51; Schlee 2007, 102).

An auto-poietic complex system is hence well-characterized by two circular relationships:

1. The circularity between "producer" and "product"
2. The circularity between "being" and "doing".

Due to those circularities, an auto-poietic system is autonomous, because it generates its own rules and boundaries.

Now, Fischer-Lichte argues that performances, happenings and the like are auto-poietic in this sense. As a matter of fact, situations in which there is an audience in front of the performers make the interaction between them possible. This factual possibility distinguishes performing from non-performing arts. Feedback loops do not occur in painting or carving in the normal case. In the normal case the beholders' responses, their perceptions and judgments of a certain painting do not influence the way the painting is painted. They certainly can influence subsequent paintings by the same artist (and naturally also by other artists) as regards the interpretation thereof given by other people. Nevertheless, that painting remains the

same, after the beholders' emotional and interpretative responses. On the contrary, in performing arts the audience response can influence the performance which is taking place at the same moment at which that response is produced.

Hence, the fact that during classical live music performances, theatrical plays or dance shows this interaction, in a lot of cases, does not seem to occur is due to social, cultural conventions or customs rather than to a factual impossibility. In many cases, I think, the interactive nature of a performance is a matter of aesthetic precepts. Especially, but not exclusively, in performing arts based on previous written works, the precept to execute a work faithfully has as a consequence the normative prohibition and the factual reduction of interactions between performers and audience.

So, what Fischer-Lichte's thesis seems to mean is that the new performance arts (since the *avant-garde*) exploit the possibilities of performing arts to an extent that was not "allowed", as it were, before. She seems to claim that these changes largely depend upon the fact that before the age of the *avant-garde* performing arts were still art forms based on "works" already composed or created. The art product was the work produced by a composer, by an author, and he/she was the real artist; the performer should follow, if possible with artistry, the instructions prepared by the author and he/she should represent or express what the author wanted his or her composition or play to represent or express. The feedback loop should be avoided or at least narrowed. This was the precept.

Now, things have changed. We have art forms in which not only performers directly invent what they perform, but that also intentionally explore and exploit, rather than intentionally trying to limit, the resources of the feedback loop between artists and audience, to the extent that often the audience participates in the artistic event, contributing to its realization. Extending a distinction proposed by Peter Kivy for music, before we had "arts for spectators", now we have "arts for participation" (Kivy 2001, 180-182).

In those art forms there is no rigid difference between artists and spectators. On the one side, improvisation is one of the main features of many contemporary performing arts (jazz, living theatre, happenings, etc.); on the other, often the spectators' reactions as well as their influence upon other spectators and upon the "artist(s)" cannot be controlled by the artists. So, even the spectators/artists difference tends to vanish, or at least be less rigid. There are not only several possibilities of reciprocal contact between artist(s) and audience: the spectator is often a performer in his/her own

right, who not only enjoys the performance, but contributes to making it.

According to Fischer-Lichte, in new performing arts the performance is auto-poietic in this sense because it makes itself: it is not the exclusive product of the artist's actions and intentions. It does not need to follow external instructions by means of expression or representation to be what it is. Performances do not refer by means of expression or representation to emotions or symbolic meanings. Like in everyday life, meanings and emotions occur, as it were, only as performed actions. So, in happenings, performances and the like one experiences and lives situations that are not fictional or imaginative, but, like scientific experiments, real situations, in which one can experiment with reality, while living it. They are "laboratory situations", which are no longer differentiated from everyday experiences, because they are at the same time parts of life and its models (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 359). They are *ad hoc* provoked and purpose-made real life situations which give the participants the chance to live the events of life with special intensity and directness, but without any detachment. In everyday life, you are continuously involved in feedback loops, because your behavior is a response to other agents' behavior, which, in turn, is affected by your response, and so on. The same thing, seemingly, happens in today's performative practices. So, what happens in a performance is not the interruption of the everyday experience, but its continuation: there is no real separation between art (from the one side) and the social, economic, political, ethic world (from the other side).

Hence, the self-referential and auto-poietical nature of this kind of performativity are the main reasons offered by Fischer-Lichte and others in support of the idea that art forms based on events, and no longer on works, involve the audience in forms of participation which make it impossible to aesthetically experience the event in a "distanced" and "disinterested" way.

These ideas about the performativity of performing arts raise some interconnected questions.

The first one is whether work-based performances are really devoid of feedback loops, that is, whether feedback loops are exclusive features of explicit improvisational and interactive performing practices.

The second question is why the new performing arts are not expressive or representative.

The third question, finally, is whether the participatory and interactive nature of a performance (based on feedback loops) prevents its experience from being an aesthetically disinterested experience to the extent that its artistic character could only depend on its institutional nature.

In the remainder of the paper I will try to answer these questions (§§5,

6, 7). §8 tries to answer to some possible objections against the position I endorse and presents some conclusive remarks.

The performative process

The first question is whether performances based on the interactive feedback loop can not be founded on “works”. This is not the case, because, in a certain sense, every performance, although interactive and producing and produced by feedback loops, is not completely improvised. In fact, even performing arts based on improvisation and actively involving the audience are in some sense founded on programs, instructions, projects or leading ideas that are the starting point of the performance. In other words, there is no completely improvised performance or, rather, the improvisation is not a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*³. Hence the interactive and improvised performance is maybe not the instance of a previous written or composed work (*opus*), but some previous work has to be done as the performing events’ baseline or guideline.

Even in extreme cases, when the player goes on stage without any idea of what to play and to improvise, the way he/she improvises depends, in an important sense, on the work he/she did before, learning how to improvise. As in the case of improvised music, “a definition of improvisation in terms of complete spontaneity is far too restrictive” (Young and Matheson 2000, 127).⁴

On the other hand, even if the performance is supposed to be the faithful execution of a previous composed work or play, which establishes all the instructions for the execution, without permitting any allowance for performers’ interpretation, certainly the mood of the evening, the audience behavior and other social and environmental factors will influence the performative process, to the extent that there will hardly be two completely identical performances of the same work. (cf. Sparti 2005, 30) Also, in traditional live performances based on previously produced works, performers perceive in some way and to some degree the audience’s emotional response to what they are doing. This affects their performances and contributes to the originality of every live performance (of the same work). Although sometimes normatively banned in performances that are accomplishments of previous composed works, interactions based on feedback loops may remain almost unperceivable, but they actually occur in every performance. And vice versa, it can happen that interactions do not occur or, rather, that they occur in a very less noticeable way—even if the performance is the result of an

improvisation and even if the audience is supposed to actively participate in the performance.⁵ This means that the separation and the absence of interaction between artists and audience is a gradual matter: it is not due to a factual impossibility.

Emotions, meanings and contents

Furthermore the claim about the complete self-referentiality of the significance of a performative event, i.e. the idea that performativity rules out expressivity and representationality, is not convincing. According to this claim, art performances are completely free and improvisational events, which do not bring emotions and meanings to the scene by means of expression or representation. Allegedly, only real actions and reactions executed by real interacting human beings count.

This is a mere wrong presupposition. Even if there is not an already well processed work to base the performance on, the expressed emotions, the referred meanings or the represented contents are not produced and transmitted in the same ways as emotions, meanings and contents you come across in “extra artistic” situations. The fact that in a certain performance real interactions between flesh and blood persons happen in everyday places, as much as the prominence of the materiality and the physicality of the performers’ bodies and actions, may contribute to the performance’s artistic success and its innovative, disruptive, playful, etc. aspects. This is part of the ways that performance communicates meanings and emotions, i.e. one of the performance’s aesthetic features, and it does not rule out at all its expressive or representational powers. These ways to communicate emotions, meanings and contents, by performing actions you may possibly participate in, are exactly what you appreciate in art performances. Hence, also in interactive live performances, you appreciate the ways emotions and other semantic contents are expressed and represented (inclusively the ones expressed and represented by your performative contribution to the performance). Anyway, you are not functionally and instrumentally interested in the real existence of the represented and expressed emotions and contents and you know that you are in a kind of play. Unless you notice some (representational or expressive) difference in the performer’s emotional or semantic behavior in comparison with the emotional and semantic behavior of people in everyday life situations, either you are probably not attending to or participating in an art performance, but making some other experience, or it is an art performance of little artistic value.⁶

Aesthetic experience

So, the last question I would like to answer to is maybe the main one, considering the point I am committed to arguing. The problem is precisely whether improvisational and/or interactive performances based on feedback loops can or cannot, in principle, be aesthetically experienced for their own sake in a disinterested way. Many authors answer negatively. They say that in performances, happenings and the like there is no longer aesthetic differentiation. In fact, they maintain that there are no works upon which performances are based and the dichotomy signifier/signified collapses, while only the performed actions matter, and not what they could express or represent. So, the argument goes on, there are no rigid boundaries between 1. art performances, 2. non art, but aesthetic performances (like TV shows, sport events, etc), 3. rituals and, more generally, there is no clear difference between 4. art and life, but rather something like an unstable "threshold" (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 357). And, given this situation, only art institutions can confer the art status to a performance, which, otherwise, could not be regarded as an art performance. In other words, in order to distinguish between art performances and everyday events, you should turn to the "institutional theory of art". Like Duchamp's readymades, commonplace objects that receive the art status from the art world, performances are artistic if they occur within artistic contexts.

I think I have cast some doubt on the validity of the premises of this argument while answering the first two questions. Hence I can anticipate my answer to the third question. The feedback loop can occur in an art performance without causing the end of the aesthetic differentiation between art and life. If the spectator participates in the art event, even to such an extent that he/she decisively, while expressing his/her emotions and/or communicating meanings, contributes to the way the performance succeeds, therefore becoming an essential element of that performance, he/she can still regard his/her participation and the whole interaction as aesthetic. His/her aesthetic experience is certainly not only a contemplation of the event, but an active participatory contribution to its success as art event.

Nonetheless Fischer-Lichte maintains that the attempt to understand a performance after having participated in the performance is no longer an essential part of the artistic appreciation of the process (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 270). The reason she provides to argue for this view is that this attempt to understand is not part of the performance: it takes place after the performance and it cannot add anything to the feedback loops that

constitute the performative process.

She defends the view that we have to experience the performance and this experience rules out subsequent understanding, because performances cannot be contemplated, but lived through. She argues that both successive linguistic descriptions of a performance experience as well as your remembering the experience you have had are constitutively insufficient to get the significance of the performance as performance. In fact, they cannot give you back what was happening *hic et nunc*; they cannot make you live the experience (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 270-280).

Certainly, having an experience is different from describing or remembering one. But, apart from the fact that remembering an experience and linguistically describing it can retrospectively add, through a kind of temporal feedback loop, something to the subjective quality of experience you participated in, I can't see any reason to argue that the direct interactive experience rules out any attempt to understand what is happening and what you are doing while participating in the performance.

The "spectator" can reflect on what he/she is doing or on what he/she has done during the performing event, that he/she in a certain degree contributes to create; in this way, he/she can aesthetically enjoy through the distance produced by reflection what they are doing or what they have done, noticing the aesthetic qualities of the experience they are/were making. They can enjoy as aesthetic object their response to the actions as much as the entire interaction between all the subjects involved in the performance. And they may be also aware that this performing event, the interaction between themselves and other spectators and between themselves and the artists, has/had something particular to it, something that makes it an artistic event. In this way, a spectator's awareness of his/her contribution to the aesthetic success of the performance can be a big part of the aesthetic pleasure he/she takes from this experience.

Therefore, the performance is neither less artistic nor is the experience thereof less aesthetic, if the audience interacts with the "artists". You do not cease to have an aesthetic consciousness of an art event if you directly take part in the way it happens. You can have an aesthetic consciousness of the participatory interaction that constitutes the performance. The aesthetic object is this performative participatory interaction (cf. Saltz 1997, 123).

Hence, if somebody who participates/participated in the event does not aesthetically enjoy the event, by experiencing it as a special kind of event—as an event that, in a certain sense, is different from other events of the life experience—, then he/she is probably not involved in an art event, but rather in something else.

Actually, the recourse to the “institutional theory of art”, that, according to Fischer-Lichte and others, is the only way to explain the art nature of some performance, not only makes the claim about the disruptive character of arts based on performativity in the context of artistic practice and in art theory very troublesome, it also raises problems with regard to the auto-poieticity and self-referentiality of the event performed. Since, as we have seen, a performance event is (or at least should be) auto-poietic, it should set itself its own boundaries, since it is autonomous. But, if art institutions are the pre-established social, economic, cultural frames that provide the event with its conceptual quality as an art event, then the auto-poietic character of the event is limited. The performative event takes the rules it follows (or part of them) from its institutional frame, even if during the performance those rules are broken. Hence, in absence of aesthetically appreciable features, it is regarded as artistic only because of its context: the consequence would be that, if it is an artistic event, then its artistic nature comes, as it were, from the outside: it is no part of the auto-poietic event. Under this aspect, the institutional character of the event and its auto-poieticity conflict with each other.

Moreover, the fact that the performers often play with the institutional backgrounds of the performance in order to provoke the audience’s behavior, to the extent that sometimes you don’t know anymore if you are involved in an art event or in something else, proves that the performance is not a completely self-regulative organism: there is a plan followed by the performer. The art-institutional character of the performance is in this case part of the performance: but whether the performance is or not artistic does not depend upon its art-institutional frame. It depends upon the way its performative reflection on (and maybe denouncement of) its own institutional character occurs and is experienced. Like a lot of very important and valued artworks, its experience can be also shocking because it crumbles the buildings of art institutions. Anyway, this shock can be an important part of its artistic value, providing that it is an aesthetic shock.

Now, an aesthetic shock, like other aesthetic experiences, is an experience that involves our imagination and intellect not in a functional (or dysfunctional) way, but rather in a playful way, implying and producing a distance from the “seriousness” of life. Through this distance we can enjoy our participation in an interactive performance event and regard it as art performance.

So art events are events that are appreciated for their own sake: in some degree they possess features and aspects, which are not a function of something else, but which in an important sense can be appreciated per

se.⁷ The fact that an improvisational and/or interactive performance is, in a certain sense, like the interactions we are involved in everyday life, because to a certain degree every action and interaction is an improvised (inter)action, which produces and presupposes feedback loops between the interacting people, does not imply that an interactive and/or improvisational performance can not principally, under some aspect, turn out to be detached from the stream of ordinary experiences and appreciated in a distanced way and for its own sake, i.e., aesthetically.

The experiences of artworks

Unfortunately, the concept of a “disinterested”, “distanced” aesthetic experience as well as its application to art is itself strongly disputed and many people are not ready to accept it, especially in the lack of further clarifications.⁸ However if you understand disinterestedness not as a psychological, but as a logical condition of the aesthetic experience of artworks and art events (see Crowther 1996, 2001, 2003 and Zangwill 1992), it is easy to understand why this concept is useful to grasp the proper character of the experiences of artworks and art events. It means that, although an object or an event may have important practical values, you can also enjoy it “without taking this value into account” (Crowther 2003, 128). This means: you can enjoy it for its own sake. And art phenomena are particularly apt to this kind of experience.

Thus, an aesthetic “for its own sake” experience of a performance you participate in can certainly be a “laboratory-experience”: but if you enjoy it as an art experience it is differentiated from the stream of ordinary experience, obviously without ceasing to be a factual, a real experience. The question remains as to how can it be reasonably argued that such a participatory interactive experience is distanced, given that while making the experience of the performed event you participate in its accomplishment to the extent that you are responsible of (part of) the way it happens. As is well known, according to Bullough, the idea of aesthetic “distance” counts only in the case of traditional staged performances, theatrical plays performed on stage and the like, that is, in the case of situations in which a person

is not actually engaged directly with the object. She is out of direct involvement with the object, experiencing it as if it were ‘out of reach’ where she cannot affect any changes that would alter the object, and the object cannot affect any changes in her. (Fenner 2003, 51)

It is as if there were a “fourth wall” separating performers and audience.

But what if objects or events, “through the way they were constructed or the way they function, invade the psychical or even physical space of the audience member?” (Fenner 2006, 51-52) What if “the fourth wall” falls down? Would the experience be in this case less distanced? If it were so, according to what I previously argued, it would be difficult to characterize it as aesthetic. But I think that, although you are physically not distanced from the object/event you experience, in an important sense, you can have both: your interactive, transformative and productive participation in the performing event and the distanced, disinterested, differentiated experience. Actually, while the art event is taking place, the audience taking part in it can experience it like a viewer that is located inside the picture he/she is painting (cf. Sparti 2005, 49). He/she contributes to the production and the turning out of the event, and he/she reflectively experiences what he/she is making, his/her interactions with other performers (the artist(s) and the other members of the audience) as much as the entire course of the performance, per se, for its own sake.

In art events and performances based on improvisation and/or interaction the product that is aesthetically valuable is the creative, interactive and improvisational process itself, with its feedback loops, and also with its possible mistakes, incoherencies, etc. Therefore, certainly, those art performances cannot be appreciated in a formalistic way. (cf. Sawyer 2000 and Brown 2000). But this does not mean that they cannot be appreciated in an aesthetically distanced way. Interactive live performances can be aesthetically experienced and judged according to aesthetic criteria like intelligible or surprising development, internal unity, coherence, originality, ingenuity. As in the case of jazz performances, what is aesthetically experienced and judged is the action as it is being performed, i.e. the creation rather than the artifact, including the elements of risk and frailty. Perhaps the more interactive and improvisational the performances are, the higher the risks the performers necessarily take are (cf. Alperson 1984, 22-23, 26). In any case, sometimes, the successful experience of something is more valuable, if that something involved risks. This is maybe a good reason to take part in, experience and enjoy improvisational and interactive live performances.

Performances, even disturbing and shocking ones, are artistic if they can be aesthetically experienced and appreciated. If not, they are not art performances. Those experiences can surely be so powerful and intense to the extent that, due to their perceptual qualities, their forms, their meanings, they transform you, your thinking, your sensibility, exactly in the same way as the experiences you make with other artworks (including works of non performing arts). They can perhaps be tagged as Dionysian

rather than Apollonian experiences or as experiences of the sublime (or even of the ugliness, of the unpleasant) rather than as experiences of the beautiful. Nonetheless you take a performance as art performance if you experience it aesthetically, appreciating and valuing it for its own sake, that is, making an experience that, as it were, stands out “as a distinctly singular experience in contrast to the stream of ordinary experience” (Schusterman 2006, 222).

Hence, although the notions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic attitude do not enjoy today very good health on the philosophical stage, I think that –explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally– erasing the aesthetic distance practically thwarts the pleasures offered by art as much as giving up the notions of aesthetic difference and aesthetic attitude theoretically hinders the possibility of understanding any artistic phenomenon.⁹

Notes

¹ Some theoretical problems arise when the events are not happening live, but they broadcast to the audience through media like radio, TV, the Internet. In these cases you have a live performance, but there is still a real physical distance between performers and audience. Since the theoretical question I am concerned with here is the experience of live performances which are not broadcast through technological media, I will not discuss this point.

² Cf. Fischer-Lichte (2004) and Mersch (2002).

³ For example, even in the case of jazz—a music genre that thrives on improvisation—the improvisation is hardly absolute as “improvisers do not create ex nihilo”. Also extreme forms of improvisatory music, like free jazz, exploit, despite their creativeness, “a stock of material” (Brown 2000, 115-116). See also Alperson (1984), Sawyer (2000), Sparti (2005).

⁴ I agree with Young and Matheson:

“[...] an improvised performance is one in which the structural properties of a performances are not completely determined by decisions made prior to the time of a performance... The structural properties of a performance include its melody, harmony, and length (in bars, not in temporal duration). A structural property is to be understood in contrast to an expressive or interpretive property. The expressive properties of a performance include tempo, the use of rubato, dynamics, and so on. We believe that the line between expressive and structural properties is a fuzzy one, but it must be drawn if we are to avoid the conclusion that virtually every musical performance involves improvisation.” (Young and Matheson 2000, p. 127)

⁵ In fact sometimes the required audience participation fails to take place: “Participatory theater and happenings represented an attempt to invite audiences into the process, but rarely was that actually possible... the gap

between the performers-whose relationships and performances had developed over a long time-and the "outsiders" was often too great to overcome" (Saltz 1997, 124).

⁶ People arguing against the expressive and representational features of performances sometimes support their point by giving as examples real performances during which performers executed really dangerous actions (for themselves or for the audience) that ended up by inducing the spectators to stop the performance or by stopping the performance, because the performer themselves, whose lives were in danger, could not go ahead. This happened for instance in some M. Abramovic's performances. In my opinion, this possible situation does not prove at all that, in those art performances, only the actions performed and their materiality matter but not the expression and/or representation of meanings or emotions through those actions. It only proves that at a certain moment an event, that maybe before was artistic in nature, cannot be experienced anymore as such. The artistic expression and representation ends and gives way to simply real occurring events, which are what they do. This is not another kind of art. It simply is the factual end of (that) art (event). The "game", as it were, is simply over.

⁷ Surely, they can be aesthetically experienced and valued, i.e. appreciated as and like art events, even if they are not, in origin, (performed as) art events: "For example, while the desire for victory may impel a tribe to perform a war dance, it is surely possible for the participants to be caught up in and to enjoy the rhythms and drama of the dance for its own sake, rather than in terms of its anticipated practical consequences. In such a case the logical ground of the dancers' rapture is disinterested, even if their feelings are Dionysian. Indeed [...] it is the very power of such *aesthetic* rapture that can explain why dancing and other forms of artifactual imaging are taken as having effect on practical outcomes" (Crowther 2003, 128). See also Stecker (2006, 8). Not only disruptive and revolutionary art events, but also rituals and other performing practices, which are not principally artistic, can be aesthetically experienced like and as art events, if they have features and aspects you can enjoy and understand in the same way you enjoy and understand artworks. On the contrary, as we have seen before, if the actor or the "main" performer of a supposed art event performs actions that provoke the collapsing of the aesthetic difference, the event ceases to be an *art* event.

⁸ See for example Beardsley (1982), Carroll (2000, 2002), Shusterman (2000), Stecker (2006), Bertinetto (2007), Scruton (2007).

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WITNESSING THE PAIN OF OTHERS: HOW PERFORMANCE ART IS PERCEIVED

DORIS KOLESCH

My contribution focuses on a special feature of the expression and experience of subjectivity in contemporary art since the 1960s: Witnessing and experiencing pain. Pain appears to be an anthropological constant, in the sense that there is no known culture or era totally devoid of experiences or concepts of pain, even though what is conceptualized and experienced as pain appears to be extremely varied in each case. As both a physical and mental phenomenon confronting individuals and societies, pain certainly shows signs of being an anthropological constant; one aspect, however, that is absolutely not constant and in fact extremely variable and dependent on a host of historical, cultural, social, technical and media factors, is how pain is perceived; how it is presented, understood and conceptualized, and finally how individuals or whole societies deal with the existence and experience of pain.

This preface to the topic is important to me, because my subsequent reflections are based on the premise that the depiction and perception of pain are also dependent on media factors; by which I mean how or by which media and techniques pain is addressed as a subject and conveyed within a society. With this focus on the media dimension of both the experience and expression of pain in performance art since the 1960s, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the specific aesthetic experience that such artistic events have offered and are still offering today.

Why has pain made such a career in performance art? This question is certainly one worth addressing. In 1962, Yoko Ono continually hit her head on the stage floor rhythmically to the music of *Wall Piece for Orchestra*, and a few years later, in 1969, Ben Vautier banged his head hard against a concrete wall until it started to bleed. Valie Export in 1971 crept naked over glass fragments strewn across the floor during her