WHAT IS PERFORMANCE ART?

By Amanda Coogan

What is this thing called Performance?

‘How was your performance today?’ I could be asking a teacher, a driver, a stockbroker or a lover. ‘Performance’ is a recurrent term within today’s general lexicon, yet practitioners and theorists in the field of Performance Studies disagree as to what constitutes this nebulous art form. In the context of the contemporary art world it allows us to suggest a practice full of paradoxes, willfully refusing to be fenced in.

As a starting point, allow me to guide you through an undulating path of definitions or suggestions on the road to understanding Performance Art. I will not be directing you towards a signpost marked ‘Performance Art’ because there is no such thing. But if there were, you would find a plethora of practitioners squabbling at its base, with the live durational performance artists staging an infinite sit-in.

Performance — a broad church

Performance is an ‘essentially contested concept’.¹ Practitioners and theorists occupy this space of disagreement, allowing the field to unfold and incorporate a multitude of practices. Amelia Jones explains that “Body art and performance art have been defined as constitutive of postmodernism because of their fundamental subversion of modernism’s assumption that fixed meanings are determinable through the formal structure of the work alone.”² Performance Art cannot be described simply in terms of a particular structure or work. All forms and media are at the artist’s disposal. Santiago Sierra’s work Veterans of the Wars of Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and Iraq facing the corner, 2011 at the Manchester Gallery of Art simply installed a performer in a bare room for seven hours a day over nine days. Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh collaborated on their 1992 Sounding the Depths video, photographic and sound installation, projecting mouths onto each other’s bodies; proclaiming bodily ownership amid this turbulent period of lack of control over Irish women’s bodies.

Indeed, Performance Art cannot be said to stem from any one particular discipline: theatre, dance or the visual arts. London’s Live Art Development Agency describe Live Art as ‘a gene pool of artists, whose work is rooted in a broad church of disciplines, they have crossed each other’s paths, blurred each other’s edges and, in the process, opened up new creative
forms. With practices from different art forms performing, Performance Art is, then, interdisciplinary, collapsing the boundaries between disciplines. This essay, however, focuses on performance in the visual arts, a practice ubiquitous in the contemporary art world.

**Body — Site — Audience — Time**

Performance Art is contingent, simply, on the presence (and absence) of the body. The body, site, audience and time are its four pillars, with corporeal action the central axis. Artists turned to the physical body and brought an ‘aliveness’, a temporality and instability to artworks. Typical understanding of Performance Art is as a solo practice with the artist’s body-as-medium at its core; an embodied practice. But the practice may also incorporate other bodies: performers and audience members. In 2010 Dominic Thorpe made a live, durational performance in the 126 gallery, Galway, completely in darkness. *Redress State, Questions Imagined* gave the audience small torches to illuminate the darkened performance site as they wished, engaging the viewer in an auditory, sense experience. Thorpe’s removal of one of our senses refocused our experience of his work into a physical, embodied one.

It is the action of the body, the authenticity of an activity, that frames it as Performance Art. RoseLee Goldberg describes the context thus: ‘… the live presence of the artist, and the focus on the artist’s body, became central to notions of ‘the real,’ and a yardstick for installation and video art.’

Performance Art, from its beginnings, occurred in both alternative and formal locations. Site is a potent element in the framing of the work. A work of live performance on the street will have a distinct reading to one viewed in a gallery context. Indeed a performative video or photograph shot on the street has a different interpretation to one shot in a studio. This essay is littered with examples of live performance works with the site listed as a significant element to the manifestation of the works.

Time, or what is called duration in Performance Art, is a critical element. Performance Art is a time-based practice. Durational work — generally anything over three hours — is a particular strand of practice and inevitably brings with it elements of endurance. Endurance comes in different forms; from the grande endurance or masochistic performance to the petite endurance, occurring in performances that explore everyday life.

**What kind of activity?**

With the body at the center of performance practice, what kind of activity occurs? The influential Performance Studies scholar and theatre director, Richard Schechner, describes
performance as ‘an ephemeral event which shares characteristics with a nexus of activities including play, game, sport, and ritual.’ Consider the following artworks:

- **Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.** Burden walked into F Space gallery, California and had himself shot in the arm.
- **Marina Abramovic /ULAY, *Rest Energy*, 1980, ROSC ’80, Dublin.** A bow and arrow is held taut by the performers’ body weight, the arrow pointed directly at Abramovic’s heart. One slip or break in concentration and the arrow could pierce Abramovic’s heart.
- **Franko B, *I Miss You!, 2002, Tate Modern.** Franko walked up and down a catwalk, bleeding from the veins in each arm, painting the canvas-covered floor with his blood.
  
  Works such as these are often thought of when considering Performance Art; sensational and risky, they challenge the very integrity of the corporeal body, and are emblematic of grande endurance works. Performance practice, even from the 1960s and ’70s, also includes works focusing more on participation and transforming everyday actions:

- **Joseph Beuys, *Bureau for Direct Democracy*, 1972.** A live performance. Over the 100 days of Documenta 5, Beuys invited the audience to engage in conversation with him on democracy and politics.
- **Pipilotti Rist, *Ever is Over All*, 1997.** A performance to video. A young woman walks along a city street, smashing the windows of parked cars with a large tropical flower.

**Performance Art — the Performing Arts**

The Performing Arts refers to theatre, dance, opera and the circus. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner made a key distinction between Performance Art and the Performing Arts when he declared Performance Art as: ‘making, not faking.’ Put simply, the artist is actually shot in the arm, car windows are really smashed, skin is truly sunburned. These are not illusions but actual bodily experiences.

**Is the Performance Artist acting?**

Performance occupies an in-between place. The performance artist is not ‘acting’ in the traditional theatrical sense. They are not performing themselves but not not performing...
themselves either. The performance frame is contingent and temporary, holding the performer in a liminal, provisional and suspended place. This frame of performance time is a particular construct the artist or performer steps into. Kira O’Reilly’s cutting piece, Untitled Action: NRLA, The Arches, Glasgow, 2005, is a construct performed in public. While in action it may relate to forms of self-harm, made public and placed in the Live Performance frame, it offers the viewer an empathetic human-to-human encounter. Precisely because O’Reilly performs live, inhabiting the same place and time as the audience, and is the artist/maker constructing the action, the work becomes an intersubjective experience.9 Josette Feral elucidates: ‘… ‘performance’ attempts not to tell (like theatre) but rather to provoke synesthetic relationships’.

A short and rocky road into the history of performance

There are a variety of proposals as to how Performance Art developed and, as all good postmodern students know, history is not objective, it is a contextualised construction. From the perspective of a practitioner in the field of performance from the visual arts, allow me to sketch the relatively brief history of Performance Art.

RoseLee Goldberg’s book, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present, first published in 1979, dates the beginning of Performance Art very precisely to 20 February 1909: the day the first Futurist Manifesto was published in Le Figaro newspaper. She charts her theory on the development of the art form up through Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism and Bauhaus and cites the significant influence of the Black Mountain College in the US as foundational, referring to John Cage in music, Merce Cunningham in dance and Allan Kaprow’s Happenings. Looking to parallels in Europe, she cites the practices of Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein and Joseph Beuys as important — artists we identify more immediately as belonging to the visual arts. Goldberg’s arc of Performance Art encompasses the different disciplines of theatre, dance, visual art and music into the family of Performance Art. Goldberg explains that ‘… by its very nature performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists. Any strict definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself.

Another historical perspective from close to the emblematic era is Performance by Artists, edited by A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale and also published in 1979. In her Introduction, Gale opens by making two clear distinctions in practice between Canada/US and Europe. She cites European practice as ‘more theoretical, more intellectualized — if only because of the apparent rejection of those qualities of narration and entertainment [as seen in
Canadian and US works]… [European practice employs] tableaux vivants… [and is]… a form of extended sculpture.¹²

Looking at this from the globalized world of the twenty-first century, it is informative to note that in the days before the multifarious biennials and blockbuster exhibitions crisscrossing the world there was a proposal suggesting two clear branches of practice. Gale cites a foundational figure in each location: Vito Acconci in Canada/US and Joseph Beuys in Europe.

Thomas McEvilley, in a less historically-focused trajectory, suggests three fountains of interest as noteworthy in the development of Performance Art practice:

1. Performance emerges from the history of theatre and begins as a counterpoint to realism.
2. Performance emerges from the history of painting and gains its force and focus after Jackson Pollock’s ‘action painting’.
3. Performance represents a return to investigations of the body most fully explored by shamans, yogis and practitioners of alternative healing arts.¹³

McEvilley’s reference to painting as a springboard for Performance Art resonates in Harold Rosenberg’s watershed 1952 essay, ‘The American Action Painters’, illustrating a turn in practice; ‘… what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event […] The image would be the result of this encounter.’¹⁴ Performance artworks are events that have at their core a living, breathing body presented in an art frame.

Hans Namuth’s 1950 documentary film of Jackson Pollock at work is also influential, aligning the medium of film with an artist’s action. Performative practice is extant in the contemporary art world. At a cursory glance we can cite Matthew Barney’s mammoth Cremaster series and Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, with the artist taking on different guises, staging (or performing) images of feminine stereotypes.

Looking at this trajectory it is interesting to note that even from its emblematic period, performance practice was not contingent on the presence of a live audience. Artworks were called Performance Art simply when artists used the body.

Performance Art — live or mediated presentation?

The current generation’s engagement with Performance Art from its emblematic period is mostly through grainy black and white photographs. These images themselves become iconic references to influential works, and are unavoidably dislocated from the context of their live presentation. They live bound up in the mythology of the event. It is the re-presentation of these ephemeral events that excites; the absent made present, the disappeared reappearing in the form of photography, video and stories.

Alanna O’Kelly made her 1995 live performance Omós in St Mary’s Abbey, Dublin. In the darkly-lit twelfth-century chapel, O’Kelly’s feet and calves were illuminated as she ran on the spot. The hairs on her legs stood out, the sound of her breath audibly taxed. I did not witness this live performance and have only seen fleeting video documentation of it, but it lives in the annals of Performance Art folklore. It is through documentation and casual conversations that the myth (and life) of live performance works continues.

The ‘evidence’ of such artworks are available to us through representations of the event: photographs, posters, sometimes videos, and always stories, testimony and mythology. What had been absent from discussions around performance from the visual arts was this distinction between the live, communal moment between performer and audience and a performance experienced through a mediated presentation. That was until Peggy Phelan’s ontological proclamation of performance’s contingency on the live experience: ‘Performance’s only life is in the present’.

Phelan’s seminal essay focuses on the ‘manically charged’ present of a live performance. This ‘presentness’ of both performer and spectator calls for, in Phelan’s terms, the active participation of the audience in the liminal space of live performance. The audience become interpreters or co-creators when experiencing live performance; the emancipated spectator that philosopher Jacques Rancière writes of.

This spotlight on the relationship between the live performer and live audience refocused discussion about Performance Art to its liveness and its relational bond with the audience. The term Live Art emerged in the UK, and was formalized with the formation of the Live Art Development Agency in 1999. Live Art centers on the temporality and ephemerality of Performance Art in its widest sense.

Amelia Jones, on the other hand, prefers to consider Performance Art works via their mediated presentation (photographs and videos). She opts to refer to the works as Body Art rather than Performance Art and claims the viewer can also have this performative relationship
with an image from a performance work.\(^ {17}\) (Here we are challenged by the multiple contemporary uses of the term ‘performance’. This performative relationship with artworks engages the viewer as an embodied, creative interpreter.) The mediated document, Jones claims, is equally as valid as the live performance and indeed is more neutralized and set apart, allowing the viewer to consider it outside of the manically charged present of live performance. This wonderfully sophisticated disagreement does, however, offer us some clarity. With Phelan’s declaration of the ‘presentness’ of Performance Art and the emergence of the term Live Art on the one hand, and Jones’ subsequent hypothesis and focus on mediated works/documentation — Body Art — we may glimpse the possibility of a distinction in modes of presentation, all of which come under the umbrella term Performance Art.

- Live Performance Art: Live presentation in front of an audience, corporeal activity made public
- Performative Work: A mediated presentation, made privately to the camera or re-presentation of a Live Performance

**Performance Art and the Death of the Object**

Ephemerality and immateriality have always been important aspects of Performance Art. For some practitioners in the 1960s and ’70s this immateriality was a form of protest directly against the art market. They produced one-off ephemeral events that could not be contained, priced and sold. In the contemporary era of service industries and commodified events, this political stance against the art market is especially complicated.

Tino Sehgal’s performance works are hinged purely on live encounters. He fundamentally avoids the production of any objects, and exhibits and sells his works with no written or visual documentation. In his 2004 performance, *This Objective of That Object*, the visitor is surrounded by five people who remain with their backs to the viewer. The five chant, ‘The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion’; when the visitor does not respond they slowly sink to the ground. If the visitor engages with them they begin a discussion. Sehgal’s works have been collected by a number of significant institutions around the world, including the Tate, London and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.\(^ {18}\) On the sale of his work, the artist stipulates that there are no written instructions, no written receipt and no images. Sehgal’s practice has been read as the full stop in the death of the object: ‘Body Art should be seen as an extension of, not substitute for, conceptual art’.\(^ {19}\)
But can we have it all?

Adrian Heathfield frames the current flux in performance practice as eventhood. ‘Eventhood allows spectators to live for a while in the paradox of two impossible desires: to be present in the moment, to savor it, and to save the moment, to still and preserve its power long after it has gone.’ There are, of course, no rules: performance artists may make ephemeral events and produce images, videos or objects around those events, or structure their work to live purely in the moment of its live performance. Heathfield’s distinction suggests that the detritus and documentation of live action functions as a relic of an event passed into memory but, as Jones asserts, these subsequent performative artworks hold their own potency independent of the live moment.

The Audience

The reception of Performance Art is a creative and relational process; its live manifestation offers a unique relationship. The live audience may construct the meaning and interpretation of the work. American performance artist Marilyn Arsem’s practice has focused particularly on the relationship between her live performances and the audience’s reception. Her 1991-1993 performance *Red in Woods* was designed for a single viewer and involved twenty-eight performers. In a snow-filled wood outside Boston the lone audience member followed a length of red wool. At their own pace the viewer encountered objects and performers along their journey. ‘Each person’s understanding of the performance was unique, coloured by her or his own concerns, undiluted by anyone else’s perspective.’

Live performance lives in the experiential, a process made public, an encounter inviting the viewer to engage, bringing their own personal meaning to the work.

An exciting and potent part of live performance is the mythology that develops around a one-off temporal event; the creative reverberations that come from the audience. Art writing plays an important role, from the formal essays and reviews to the social media forums such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, where the audience’s transformative experience is communicated.

Irish Performance Art

Live performance from the visual arts in Ireland is currently a vibrant practice, grounded in responding with the physical body and psychological self. There are many theories on how and why this kind of practice has developed, with suggestions that such evolution is
closely connected to the Troubles, amid which artists felt conventional forms of art making failed to express the experiences happening outside the door of the studio.\footnote{22}

The significance of Alastair MacLennan within Irish practice cannot be underestimated: a teacher in Belfast from the mid '70s, MacLennan asks his audience to witness and co-inhabit the visceral territories he explores. In 1988 MacLennan made a seminal work, *The Burn*, in the shell of the building adjoining the old Project Arts Centre in Dublin. In an eight hour non-stop actuation (MacLennan’s term for his performance installations), he moved slowly around the burned-out shell of the building amid rubble and specifically placed objects, including pigs’ heads and burned-out flags, electrifying the site-specific installation with the human body.

Another important point of reference is Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland’s performative stance in response to the political situation in Ireland. In 1972, O’Doherty changed his name to Patrick Ireland in a ritual performance, again at the Project Arts Centre, in protest against the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry. He vowed to sign all of his subsequent artworks as Patrick Ireland. In 2008 O’Doherty buried Patrick Ireland in a Live Performance in the grounds of IMMA in recognition of the progress of the peace process.

Samuel Beckett’s late plays, *Not I, That Time and Breath*, ‘exist somewhere between installation and poetry, their strict aesthetic bringing the meditative rhythms of visual art into performance.’\footnote{23} His works are essential pivots for performance practitioners globally, but clearly have special significance for Irish artists.

**And Currently**

Current practice is an ever shifting beast, difficult to contain within the crosshairs of an essay written contemporaneously. Nevertheless, Performance Art currently stands at a particular moment of evolution. As collections around the world attempt to reflect and collect performance works, there has been some significant examination into methods of extending, capturing and archiving the ephemerality of performance works both in theory and in practice.

*TRACE: Displaced* was performed live at the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow in 2008. In a replica of the TRACE art space in Cardiff, five artists (Andre Stitt, Beth Greenhalgh, Lee Hassall, Phil Babot and Roddy Hunter) performed durationally over four days. On a table outside the installation, Heike Roms made a live documentation of the live performance using Post-it notes, polaroids and typed sheets of paper. At one point she noted one of the performers making an action in the centre of the installation — the site, she noted, in the gallery in Cardiff that Northern Irish artist Brian Connolly had buried his time capsule.
during his 2002 live performance Initiate. Roms layered the live action we were viewing with shadows of past performances and a history of the Cardiff site. Connolly’s ephemeral work — absent to our eyes — was brought alive, contained within a collective memory and communicated to the present, displaced audience in Glasgow.

Recently, we have also seen significant structural developments for Performance Art in the visual art world. In 2009 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York appointed their first Curator-in-Chief for Performance Art, and the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester cleared its permanent collection and installed fourteen durational performances for a three-week exhibition. 2010 saw the first retrospective of a performance artist: Marina Abramovic’s The Artist is Present at MoMA.

Galleries and museums are currently opening their doors to live Performance Art, either ‘eventing’ an exhibition or making exhibitions centered on Live Performances. This development opens the white cube to a messy unpredictability. Live performance is often a chaotic beast, with the collision of the fluctuating unknowns of action, site, time and audience. Part of the excitement of anything witnessed live is this tantalizing unknown; each iteration of a live performance is unique and unrepeatable.

Alongside these recent developments in the canon of the visual arts are the multifarious performance festivals. In many countries around the world significant festivals of Performance Art show a wide range of Live Performances over concentrated periods of time. The National Review of Live Art in Glasgow, set up in 1979, is one of the longest running festivals of Live Art in the world, showing a variety of Performance Art practices. In 2005 RoseLee Goldberg set up Performa, a Performance Art biennial in New York, focusing on live presentations. In 2001 IMMA hosted the performance event Marking the Territory. Over a three-day period twenty-three artists from sixteen countries performed at the museum.

Live Performance can happen anywhere, at any time, for any duration. Beyond, the Northern Irish performance collective, perform regularly on the streets of Northern Ireland — often unannounced but sometimes framed within an arts festival — making dynamic interventions in public spaces, outside galleries or cultural institutions. Abramovic, on the other hand, performed live in the cathedral of contemporary art, MoMA, New York in 2010 for three months.

Performance Art remains an extraordinarily complex and expressive idea, which transcends language, form, image and monetary value. It defies categorization: it’s live; it’s mediated; it appears; it disappears; it’s an experience; it’s an image; it’s a smell; it’s a sound; it exists; it persists; it’s a video; it’s a photograph; it’s a story; it’s an object; it’s an idea; it’s a
relationship; it’s called Live Art; it’s called Body Art; it’s called Performative Practice. It is Performance Art, asking ‘us what it means to be here, now.’²⁵

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5. See Kathy O’Dell, Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, which describes masochistic performance practices, including Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and early Abramovic/ULAY.


17. See Amelia Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject.

18. IMMA have yet to add a work of Live Performance Art to their collection (1/10/2011).


24. Marina Abramovic Presents … at the Whitworth Gallery of Art, Manchester, 3-19 July 2009. Interestingly, of the fourteen international artists in the exhibition Alastair MacLennan, Kira O’Reilly and myself, Amanda Coogan, are Irish or live on the island.

Performing arts are a form of art in which artists use their voices or bodies, often in relation to other objects, to convey artistic expression. Performance is a genre in which art is presented "live," usually by the artist but sometimes with collaborators or performers. Indeed, whenever artists have become discontented with conventional forms of art, such as painting and traditional modes of sculpture, they have often turned to performance as a means to rejuvenate their work. Performance art of this period was particularly focused on the body, and is often referred to as Body art.