

## Thoughts on Writing Histories of Art, Live and Otherwise

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**Caroline Bem** In *Drama, Performativity and Performance*, W.B. Worthen writes: “The text is absorbed into the multifarious verbal and nonverbal discourses of theatrical production, transformed into an entirely incommensurable thing, an event. Texts in the theater are always more like the phonebook than like Hamlet: they are transformed by the performative environment of the theatre into something else, a performance.”<sup>1</sup> By virtue of their rootedness in the moment of the coming together between a text and a specific performance of it, performance studies are most definitely the site where texts and approaches to them might be theorized as both ‘sets of potentialities’ and ‘encounters.’ SEACHANGE’s primary focus rests on an approach to theory through an engagement with specific ‘moments,’ such as ‘the face-to-face’ for instance, which are modeled on ‘lived experience.’

In your book *The En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (1994) there is an ‘intertext’ between chapters 5 and 6 where you describe your encounters with *Étant donnés* by Duchamp in a very personal way. Of course there is a ‘tradition’ for this sort of more subjective take on art historical writing—more recently T.J. Clark’s book *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) where he writes about his repeated encounters with two Poussin paintings.

Maybe this is something unique to art historical writing; the need or necessity for a specific moment of face-to-face with a given work, for a primal

<sup>1</sup> W.B. Worthen, “Performativity and Text,” *PMLA*. Vol. 113, No.5. (October 1998): 1097.

encounter so to speak. What is it that is so enticing about the status of our encounters with works of art, and that makes them different from those with texts or even performances? Is there something unique about the encounter with the work of art?

**Amelia Jones** Yes and no. The mystified idea of a visual art work as somehow proffering a unique experience is ideological. Art is a construct, so all it is, really, is a ‘bunch of stuff’ that a person put together in one way or another. The only thing that makes us encounter it in a particular way is our belief that it’s art, which then leads us to assume or imagine that it’s the expression of an individual subject. Our relationship to those elements is different with different media. So if we see a feature film, for instance, chances are most people don’t know anything about James Cameron and don’t care. That’s not what you do when you go to see a film—or not what most people do aside from auteur approaches where a specialist would be interested in the films of auteurs such as Lars von Trier, or what have you. It’s a fully constructed relation [that of the spectator to the work of art], and I completely reject mystified notions of art as somehow emanating some special kind of experience.

It’s interesting that you picked that out as a common trope in art history because, more often than not, it’s the opposite—the specificity of the encounter is veiled or occluded. So I saw it as a radical act to read Duchamp’s work in that way, particularly coming out as a graduate student and revising what was my Ph.D. dissertation, to unveil that set of relations (to expose my desire and investments) and actually make the encounter specific in terms of my identifications, because that’s what art history has long coyly refused to do. Art history likes to present its interpretations as objective. So even when

someone like T.J. Clark is seemingly writing about a personal experience of the work of art he would tend to be authoritative in his tone. It's a very different approach, I hope, to the one I made all those years ago in the Duchamp book, because, for [Clark]—I haven't read that book—his approach would tend to be: 'I'm T.J. Clark, the famous art historian, so my personal experience returning to this Poussin again and again and again will be, by definition, of interest to you because I'm authoritative.' And I hope that I'm doing something actually quite different to that in the Duchamp book (particularly since I was an unknown when I published it!), but also in my *Irrational Modernism* book (2004) where that's a much more heightened part of the writing to enact the same kind of exposure. The idea of *Irrational Modernism* is that it becomes increasingly unhinged, and interpersonal by the end, so that I've increasingly rejected this structure of opportunity by overidentifying with the baroness who's this figure I've personally pulled out of this very complex history.

**C.B.** I think the reason I was asking this question in the first place is partly because I do see one important difference between an encounter with a work of art that is in a room, accessible at any time, and an encounter with a written text or a film. A film, for instance, is an experience with a predetermined length, and I do think the encounters with the works that you describe have something that is closer to an immediate meeting. It's almost like a meeting between two people. It's almost that moment of finding oneself in a dark room with someone else, or at least of not being quite sure [whether one is alone or not].

**A.J.** You're talking about constructions. There are lots of art works now that take place over time. But you're also talking about ontological distinctions between different kinds of experiences, which are really important. And one of the interesting things about being trained as a traditional art historian (and I'll be rolling my eyes on that), as opposed to being trained as a visual culture or cultural studies person who deals with images more as illustrations of larger arguments, is that, ostensibly, you are dealing on a more ontological level, but also you're dealing with a specific kind of rich history of the development of the discipline of art history. And, one hopes, although this is all too rare, with the history of those constructions. The problem with art history the vast majority of the time is that it naturalizes those constructions, such as 'I'm in front of an art work,' like you said, 'it's a direct connection with this making subject who's emanating from [the art work]—I'm caricaturing what you were saying—that's a much more common tendency, even within criticism today that poses itself as very savvy and sophisticated and poststructuralist.

One of my real critiques of art discourse in general is that it's still doing what it was doing a hundred years ago, with a little gloss of a few terms here and there, but it still has this investment in this idea that art is special and that it's a direct manifestation of an expressive subjectivity. Which, as you say, is not constructed into these other disciplinary or medium histories in the same way. So, like I said, the vast majority of people who go to see a film aren't thinking 'Oh, this is an expression of James Cameron's subjectivity' (which is a horrible thought actually!). It's really important to understand the history of those constructions and to take consideration of them, because after all that's what art is, it's constructed within that belief system. If you're not aware of it you're just going to end up, like most people do in art history, repeating these

tropes, as if they are somehow miraculous and fascinating, when in fact they're really kind of stale and not useful in terms of understanding what we're doing in the world of visual art.

**Rafico Ruiz** That's actually a good segue into my first question. Did you see this article in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* on Marina Abramović?

**A.J.** Not only did I see that article but I've written a thirty-page long scholarly critique of the Abramović phenomenon and I've also interviewed her extensively for a book I'm co-editing with another performance studies scholar on the problem of live art and history. Unfortunately you're opening a massive can of worms here... [shared laughter]

**R.R.** It does actually link up to your previous response. In this article in *The New Yorker*, the performance artist Marina Abramović remarks how "[t]he knife in a play is only an idea of something that can kill, but a knife in my work is always real." The article goes on to note that "[a]udiences were asked to witness extreme and sometimes life-threatening rituals [this is in reference to performance art] that involved self-harm, or that violated deeply ingrained taboos. Performer and beholder shared an aesthetically stylized yet visceral experience in actual time. The more puerile efforts of this school, which was called 'body art' ('performance art' or 'time-based' art are now the preferred terms), generated a prurient thrill, or just revulsion. The best of them reminded one that there is no voyeurism with impunity."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Judith Thurman, "Profiles -- Walking Through Walls: Marina Abramović and the Art of Pain," *The New Yorker* (March 8, 2010): 28.

What do you make of this ‘primer,’ especially as an instance, maybe definitional here, of a re-performance of tropes? And if I extend that to retrospective generally, what do you think you will make, if you’re willing to take that imaginative leap, of Abramović’s work *Imponderabilia*? Faced with this choice of man and woman, what body would you face?

**A.J.** I object to the whole thing. I think, first of all, that the article presents a misleading and ahistorical definition of body art. They haven’t done their homework, they don’t know what they’re talking about, and they’re taking Abramović as she’s performing herself currently, which is as *the* key figure in what was actually a very contested and complex history of a continuum of video, installation, sculpture, body, performance, theatre, dance, music. It was an amazing period and Abramović, although her early work solo and with Ulay was important, came quite late in that period actually, so I object to the whole construction. And also: “a knife is ‘real,’” what does that mean? It has the same overdetermined cultural significance in a performance that it has in theatre, and there is no clear distinction between theatre and performance art. I could tell you many examples of performance artists who are on a stage doing something that is relatively scripted, as opposed to someone in the early ‘70s putting her body forth in an interactive environment, which is maybe another extreme. While I respect Abramović immensely for her actual performances and for her hard work making her practice more visible, it’s quite upsetting to me, this whole Abramović phenomenon, because of the way in which she’s promoting herself and thereby shifting the historical record in distorting ways. The media’s loving it, there’s this horrible confluence of self-promotion and the late capitalist art market: packaged performance as a static set of Marina Abramović-led re-enactments,

which themselves are then re-packaged as expensive photographs and catalogues and a feature-length movie of her re-enactments. So it's all one big happy picture except that it's complete bollocks, really. It's resting on a series of untenable contradictions. So, if Marina Abramović is claiming that performance art is unique because it is a transfer of energy between people in a live situation, which is exactly what she claims (and is an interesting proposition to engage with in teasing out the ontology of live art), how can she then turn around and not only accede to, but actually spearhead, the packaging of performance as a bunch of commodities? I could go on.

As far as your second question is concerned, I don't care... 'Which body I would face?' I don't mind. I like male bodies and female bodies. I think that was a great piece and there was a great moment, particularly when she was working with Ulay, when there were some great pieces being made that really made people think about what it meant to be human, what it meant to engage with something in an art space, what it meant to engage with an artist in an art space. Unfortunately I think that has all largely dropped out with the 2005 Guggenheim re-enactments (her *Seven Easy Pieces* project) and now, in 2010, with her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (titled, amazingly enough, *The Artist is Present*), it's now about self-promotion and packaging.

**C.B.** So what you're really saying is that this is a moment that is fixed in history at a particular point and now we should let it be...

**A.J.** No, that's not it at all. I'm a historian. But one has to be self-conscious about how one is retrieving and rewriting and constructing. Marina's whole conceit is that she's returning you to the authentic, original

work when she reenacts a piece by Vito Acconci; which couldn't be more patently untrue. Obviously she's not returning you to Acconci because she's Marina Abramović. All you have to do, and I've written this into the paper, is to do a Google image search of 'Beuys hare,' as in Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. You come up with mostly images of Marina Abramović re-enacting the piece. In today's information economy, that's what you're doing when you reenact that piece. You're not retrieving the authenticity of the Joseph Beuys work. What I object to is the combination of what appears to be naïveté with a mechanism of self promotion taken up by the media such that Abramović is being constructed as the single avatar or producer of a correct history of those works, or the person who can retrieve the "truth" of earlier key performance works. Of course not. It's super important, nothing could be more important than that we continue to understand what's been done in the past. But this attempt must be coupled with a recognition of how fraught any retrieval is—it inevitably gets bound up not only in the "original" producers, works, historical moment but in those who are retrieving the past (and our contexts)—we can never come to a full understanding of works from the past, precisely because history can never be transparently retrieved.

**R.R.** She did create this Centre...

**A.J.** I think it's called the Marina Abramović Centre for Performance Art? As I understand this centre is both archival and pedagogical—Abramović will teach new generations of artists what to do, which is a bit worrisome—the combination of retrieving the past through archives and constructing presents. She is truly a force of nature! It's tempting to put the whole thing in

the context of her being raised in a Soviet-style communist state. I could go on. These are really important questions. Artists, art historians, curators, and particularly people running alternative art centres.... I met with the people at La Centrale here in Montréal yesterday, which is a feminist art centre. They have really serious issues that they need to deal with in terms of how to maintain the history of La Centrale. And they have placed their archive at Concordia [University, Montréal], and so they're very lucky that they have an institution that's caring for that, but of course an archive is always extremely partial.

These are really serious questions—how to honor the past, what to keep and what to throw away. And I really honour people who have to deal with that. I'm not in any way suggesting 'oh well we can't do history so we might as well forget about it,' or 'we can't do it truthfully'. Nobody's ever said that, certainly not Derrida who's often trotted out in completely distorted ways as if he was arguing that we can't be political or we can't do history—he'd never argue that. And if anything I'm a Derridean in that sense. The impossibility of knowing the truth does not mean we don't constantly try to know something.

**C.B.** Jill Dolan writes: 'Performance Studies widens the range of locations, and suggests that all of culture is in some ways performative.'<sup>3</sup> She then goes on to think about how we might need to rethink the specificity of the theatre within this paradigm, but this is less relevant to our present discussion. What I've been struck by in this formulation, what resonated with me, is this idea that all of culture is performative in some ways. From this I move on to something else: sometimes, when I think about the present

<sup>3</sup> Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 78.

academic climate and how things are evolving, it seems to me that in the humanities there is almost an overabundance of objects of study, and as the concept of ‘performativity’ comes to be applicable to all of culture, it’s almost all of culture quite literally that begins to serve as an object of study. Maybe it has to do with how post-structuralism and deconstruction brought about this explosion of ‘anything can be deconstructed,’ ‘anything can be studied,’ and it goes hand-in-hand with an explosion of academic disciplines and specializations and departments, and also, in the humanities, a bit of a contest with the sciences in trying to have as many objects of study as them. Could we say that the emergence of approaches through the prism of ‘performance’ or ‘performativity’ had something to do with possible anxieties about a finitude of objects of study and of approaches to these objects? Do you think that anything and everything can and should be studied?

**A.J.** No, I don’t think it’s anxiety about the finitude of objects. Because, if T.J. Clark can go back and look at Poussin yet again, there’s no end to what we can look at in repetition. Certainly the question of a heightened sense of globalization should put any thoughts of that to an end. Until very recently in North America and Europe we had only been looking at, for a very long time, paintings by white men in art history...

**C.B.** I think what I’m getting at is that disciplines like cultural studies, or interdisciplinary intersections where something meets something else, tend also to go hand-in-hand with this sense of endless possibility...for instance, we can look at the production of chewing gum and its particular culture...

**A.J.** It's interesting to come back to North America after having been in Britain for seven years, where art history has mostly absorbed cultural studies and, aside from the Courtauld [Institute of Art], which is a world unto its own, doesn't mind any broadening of the boundaries of the discipline either methodologically or in terms of what are the objects of study. There's no defensiveness about 'Oh, you're not allowed to look at that because it's not art'—it was wonderful. There were terrible things about being in British academia, but that part of it was just great. There's no defensiveness. I had forgotten, in North America, about the much more proprietary sense of disciplines here. Which I'm not invested in. But, I also think that cultural studies, at its worst, including visual culture studies, can be totally pointless. Because if you just have the grab-bag approach to anything and you have no rigorous sense of the 'what is the history of the ways in which these kinds of things were institutionalized and talked about,' for example, then yes, at some point these things are not interesting anymore intellectually. Personally, I always try to keep a balance, or at least some tension, a sense that 'Yes, I, for better or worse, suffered years of traditional training in conservative art history departments only to burst free with relief.' But, of course, that does give me a really deep sense of the problems of that discipline, the sense of what the canon was, mostly, before there was any impact on the part of the rights movements, and also a sense of the deep history of the discipline itself.

One of my favourite courses to teach at the graduate level is the historiography and methodologies of art history. I actually really like teaching aesthetics and explaining to students this argument that I made at the beginning: that we have to understand that this is a historically specific idea that one would even have something called 'art.' Which is kind of obvious but also kind of not. Most people don't actually think of it that way. I think there

has to be a balance. I don't believe in boundary-guarding ideas of disciplines, but at the same time I'm quite invested in understanding the history of disciplines.

**R.R.** In the introduction to the collection, *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (1999), you and Andrew Stephenson write that “[a]s classed, raced, sexed, and gendered (fully socialized and embodied) subjects, both artist and interpreter are imbricated within any potential determinations of meaning. The notion of the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must thus be understood as a *process* rather than an act with a final goal, and acknowledges the ways in which circuits of desire and pleasure are at play in the complex web of relations among artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers.”<sup>4</sup>

If you're willing to entertain the substitution, how would the notion of 'play,' in place of the 'performative,' change the intricacies of this process? And, in a similar juxtaposition, but this time on the level of this 'complex web of relations,' would you see any benefits in thinking of viewers, both specialized and non-specialized, as 'witnesses'? By this I mean, with a certain gesture to the discourses of journalism, the court room, and, of course, the everyday occurrences of life, the potential that inheres in attaching a specific form of responsibility to the experiential event and, more largely understood, to meaning itself. Could a witness, as a specific person who both saw and so must say, be understood as a 'performing' and yet also responsible viewer?

<sup>4</sup> Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (eds.), *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (New York, London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

**A.J.** Gosh, why not. And yet, I think there is a danger there.... That book marked the beginning of this problem, and it relates to the cultural studies problem, of how the 'performative' is a term that becomes so broad that it's useless. Substituting 'play,' to my mind, would call forth a totally different set of relations. What I thought of as the 'performative' at that moment, which is now about ten years ago when I wrote that, was quite specific because I had been researching the early history of body art and so on. When terms get to be so broad, they become useless. They lack rigor.

But, the second half of what you said is really interesting. And that has developed into a kind of different way of thinking about the event, and trauma theory and the whole issue of witnessing. I'm not an expert on that; I've done a little bit of reading, but I think it's really interesting. If anything, yes my political point would always be to have a responsible witnessing and interpretive engagement which is on a continuum with a responsible making in the first place; although one, in some senses, doesn't come before the other. If anything, I would like to find ways to encourage responsibility. I think that's why, to some extent, I have gripes with both art history and performance studies, as disciplines. My gripes are always about a kind of disingenuousness, hypocrisy and/or irresponsibility. This kind of lack of self-reflexivity, the repeating of old structures under the guise of saying something new, those kinds of things, that's always what pricks me to write something. It's what's motivating me to write about this Abramović [phenomenon]. The whole thing is so obviously hypocritical.

**R.R.** But is it something distinct from canonization that's going on? Because what you describe could sound like something that is distinct from canonization.

**A.J.** It is canonization, without question. But it's canonization in process. It's kind of fascinating to watch because it's happened so quickly. Five years ago nobody cared about performance art histories; and not many people, whether they were in the art world or not, cared who Abramović was. She's an older woman artist, who of course, it has to be said, completely denies feminism, or gender, which is bizarre when you think of pieces like *Imponderabilia*. How can you interpret that without dealing with gender differences? So part of me just completely admires her—that's amazing, you go girl! How could you go from obscurity to basically controlling an entire arm of the art world—including the stodgy Museum of Modern Art? But then I also know too much about all the other artists and art works and energies and impulses that are being completely swept away or distorted, in my view; distorted from my picture of what they should be—not that there's a true picture. That part of it I just can't accept.

In closing, let me be clear that I honor the *practice* of artists such as Abramović. My job as an art historian, as I see it, is to engage (as I attempted to do with *Irrational Modernism* and the Duchamp project) with as much honesty but also as much scholarly rigor as possible with the range of works (whether objects, installations, or live performances) I attempt to make sense of. The fears and pleasures and bursts of anger I might have (as with the recent Abramović project) are only my reactions to particular aspects of how works are made and then marketed or institutionalized. I attempt to shape my reactions in order to make them interesting and of scholarly value; to do this I must frame them within reasoned arguments based on my knowledge and experience.

Thank you for this good conversation!

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