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Introduction

The art of living is not one I have mastered. Neither is such mastery of a type one might ever seek, straight-faced, to profess. *The Art of Living* consists of interviews with artists who have, to differing extents, and with various intensities, made performance the basis of a life, turned their bodies or lives into works of art, or sought to cultivate performance art as a grammar to articulate the possible dissolution of sensible boundaries between art and life.

Performance art, in the provisional oral history constructed here, resembles an all-encompassing medium, or anti-medium. This encircling of art and life by performance can be idiosyncratic, excessive, subtle or rigorous. Outside the mere tactic of becoming a living sculpture, or speaking autobiography, performance artists have, variously: remodelled their bodies, through surgery, body modification or anomalous daily practices; become polymaths, folding every practice of their life into the continuous endeavour of artistic becoming; extended the duration of performance actions well beyond conventional limits, to last many months, or years; or found other means to expose the interior workings of their creative, imaginative, emotional, sexual or medical lives. In each case, such practices have exceeded – drastically or subtly – many more conventional aesthetic alternatives, such as to represent the intimate mechanics of a body or a life through memoir, poem, confession or song. The cumulative action of *living* (one's) art – an exacerbation of merely doing or making art – and the art of its refinement, is questioned by the performance artists I interviewed, as if to reinvent the life from whence a work springs, and to provoke a story – a possible history – of such endeavours.

The praxis of blurring art and life is a familiar theme in art history. For Peter Bürger, the early twentieth-century avant-garde attempted the 'sublation' or merging of the previously distinct categories of art and everyday life, in order to redesign the politics of artistic production. 'When art and the praxis of life are one,' he writes, 'when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art's purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) ... has come to an end.'¹ While for Bürger, this strategy

subsequently becomes untenable after Modernism, artists and theorists have persisted in mapping new sublations of art and life. Foremost, perhaps, the artist Allan Kaprow explained the need for ‘art that tends to lose itself out of bounds’, particularly through live performances, installations and participatory events that would enable ‘a return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic, and life’.² In 1958, Kaprow famously encouraged this introduction of life into art through the appropriation of new materials and effects: ‘An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano’ – and a litany of smells, signs, objects, actions, sounds and inevitable visions – ‘all will become materials for this new concrete art’, namely through his Happenings.³ The philosopher Arthur C. Danto coins the term ‘unnatural wonders’ to describe contemporary artworks that obliterate or confuse the gap between art and life, redefining avant-gardism in terms of ‘the way monsters bridge the boundary between humans and animal’.⁴ The metaphor grounds the freakish brilliance of art, not in a supernatural, metaphysical sense, but by affording anomalies a bluntly material status, trafficking monsters, and art, alike, into the pedestrian topographies of life.

The artists interviewed in *The Art of Living* are each engaged in *the work of a lifetime* – not towards an individual masterwork (there are no more masterpieces), but – to cultivate a continuum of practices in performance (and proximate media) that might extinguish the borderlines between a life and its creative labours. Ulay has remarked, for example, that performance was a means ‘to choreograph [one’s] whole existence. The work will restructure itself through how we live.’⁵ The neo-avant-garde or postmodernist project, beginning in the late 1950s and reaching its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s, involved bringing life (or *non-art* objects and materials) into art, for example through collage or performance-installation, typified by Kaprow’s Happenings, or the combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, which modernised and in some ways replayed the inaugural avant-gardist strategies of Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Readymades’ by transplanting or collaging found objects onto painted canvases. In a parallel campaign, artists trafficked art into life, through public interventions, pop-up events, and do-it-yourself artworks, epitomised by the agitprop performances of Joseph Beuys, and the games-and instruction-based artworks of Fluxus artists like George Brecht and Yoko Ono. Both tendencies functioned as technologies for overcoming the aesthetic autonomy associated with Late Modernism, in

order to achieve what poet John Berryman proposed as an art that 'not only expresses the matter in hand / but adds to the stock of available reality'.⁶

Apiece with yet beyond these neo-avant-garde counter-traditions, performance art is often engaged in the praxis of turning one's life – both body and subjectivity – into the stuff of art. This account of the aesthetic imperatives of performance art might risk sounding final or triumphal. However, the gesture towards the praxis of blurring of art and life also includes failure, insignificance, invisibility, boredom and subjection to the ravages of time (and age), among its dizzying remit of effects. So, while the performances discussed throughout *The Art of Living* often exemplify the art-life continuum, live art and the liveness of performance, here the broader conceit of their historicisation aims to provoke an emphasis on the *lived* nature of artistic practice, including its production and reception. Throughout the collective *corpus* sketched by the interviewees, we encounter the recurrent difficulty of distinguishing between an artist and her or his performed persona – particularly, here, for Penny Arcade, David Hoyle and the Kipper Kids, for example – and we confront performance depicted not simply as a formal commitment, but as the ontological ground for a revolutionised way of living. This might actively counter the frequent habit of historians and journalists alike to see performance art as vogueish frippery, portentous nonsense, affectation or opportunism. Performance art emerges as a means of testing *how to live* – to live more fully, more atypically, more perversely or more effectively than one might do without the sustaining practice of performance.

A history of the art of living

How, then, might we write a history of such variously excessive, striking, and anomalous practices of performance art? A particular history emerges when a chosen set of coordinates, including activities, personages, events and genealogies, is privileged, affirmed and reaffirmed. A deceptively simple question arises as the basis of any critical historiography: what alternate history – or *counternarrative* – is available when one tracks a new genealogy through a different set of historical points of reference? What new historical narratives, and conceptual conclusions, might be affirmed when a new set of stories are made available? Such questions afford the organising principle of

my approach to constructing a history of performance art, and hence, to interviewing, from the imperative to commence the present project, to my selection of artists, to the model of the interview I deployed, to the questions I asked.

Any history, like any body, requires itself actively to be differenced. The result of the published interviews, as a collective whole, suggests a novel premise for a differenced (though partial) history of performance by artists. The cumulative effect of these transcripts of encounters with artists – which is to say, with primary sources of information, alternatively schooled theorists and walking archives – lays the groundwork for an alternative theory and history of performance after 1960. Between 2007 and 2014, I interviewed 12 artists or groups (14 people in total): Penny Arcade, Joey Arias, Ron Athey, Julia Bardsley, Anne Bean, Genesis and Lady Jaye BREYER P-ORRIDGE, Adrian Howells, David Hoyle, the Kipper Kids (Brian Routh and Martin Von Haselberg), Ann Magnuson, Sheree Rose and Ulay. Each artist has been active for over twenty, thirty or forty years, and some are a generation younger than the more senior artists interviewed in the earliest parts of the book. Therefore, the book does not track a direct lineage or genealogy from one artist to another, and so on, nor does it give a full image of a scene, a period or a school of performance art. Rather, an oral history such as this one gives a series of close, detailed accounts of moments in the development of diverse but interrelated practices and styles across nearly a half-century of innovative practices in performance. Each individual artist I interviewed, regardless of relative age or youth, exerts massive influence upon peers and younger artists (including and beyond the others gathered here), by historical precedence and cultural seniority. Together, they enable a history of performance that privileges non-traditional genealogies, definitions and possibilities for performance art. The interviews were an opportunity for each artist to address their practices in performance – less to explain, validate or qualify her or his work, or practice, or process, than to *give an account of oneself*, and thus to establish the social milieu of one's creative and intellectual emergence, and the conditions and effects of artistic practice.

The oral history of performance art constructed in these pages – one among a multitude of such histories that may (and should) be constructed – considers a range of research problems or intellectual imperatives. These include: individual influences, contexts and origins, including artistic and extra-artistic ones; the blurring of art and life, and the aesthetic implications and subjective or psychic costs

of this strategic confusion or sublation; the performance artist as autodidact; subcultural or anti-institutional models of schooling, training and apprenticeship; the complexity and idiosyncrasy of artistic process, which is generally post-studio and anti-rehearsal; affect and emotion, including déclassé categories such as shock, disgust, laughter and fiasco; alternative spaces of performance, including artist-run venues, public spaces and clubs; and club performance and cabaret as a hidden genealogy of performance; collaboration, in terms of its enabling promise, and its discontents; the perceived relevance (or otherwise) of terminologies and categories; and repetition, documentation, re-enactment and re-performance.

What is performance art?

The task of giving a concrete definition of performance art is decidedly thorny. As the archetypal anti-form, or post-medium, any definition quickly constrains the seemingly intrinsic fluidity and flexibility of performance art. Many of the interviewees address the problem of taxonomy, including self-definition and formal classification. Many share a common uncertainty or hesitancy about naming, particularly in relation to performance art, and some have devised their own terminologies. Anne Bean, for example, prefers the term 'life art', while Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE aspires to 'living art'. Ulay enjoys the slippage between *performance/perforation*, and seizes on the critical neologism 'performative photography'. As such, despite the well-known, basic, categorical resistance of performance art to precise definition, using the term at all may threaten to contain the work described in these pages.

Nevertheless, working definitions abound. In 1970, Vito Acconci gave an account of performance art – one as good, at least, as any – when he wrote:

If the artist is a performer, in action, his presence alone produces signs and marks. The information he provides necessarily concerns the source of information, himself, and cannot be solely about some absent object; the transformation pertains to the general relationship of the individual to what is transpiring.⁷

Gendered pronouns aside, his thesis usefully entertains the function of a general rule for the way performance operates. Performance art

necessitates the appearance of a performing body, experienced by an audience as material, present and apparently immediate – even when (or precisely because) it is mediated. The audience might be a solitary or social body existing in the same given time and space as the performer; or the audience can be a distant one, receiving the performance as a transmission across time and space, through photographic, photo-magnetic, textual, oral and other traces.

The meaning produced in the performance, for Acconci, *necessarily concerns* the artist, whose performing body is the prime vehicle of signification. While extraneous information – context, history, a script or score – will be operative, the performance tends to privilege and prioritise effects of signification that accommodate directly the materials (bodies, objects, language, technology and space) that are visible or sensible in the performance. Therefore, the production of meaning depends upon a chemistry between the body of the artist, the materials in play and the audience – sustaining, while differentiating, the conventional relation between text, reader and context. Acconci's formal definition does not directly politicise performance art, but it points to the political potential of the actions and encounters that the form produces or incites.

Genealogically, performance art – and its weird sisters, live art and body art – is typically characterised by its double articulation in disciplinary terms, namely its push-me-pull-you relationship to visual art and experimental theatre. Its negotiation by artists and scholars tends to reiterate and celebrate its debts, and wrestle with its active (sometimes churlish) refusals. We might also add to this familiar double-articulation a broader range of *multiple* articulations, including the tension between performance art and *subculture*, and other 'low' cultural histories, staged recurrently in the interviews that follow. *The Art of Living* shows that since the late 1960s, and in the slow rippling-outwards of its aftermaths, until the present day, innovators of performance art departed from their prior fixation upon the isolated and formal considerations of visual art, and forced contact – *by way of performance* – with a diversity of time-based forms, including theatre, film and music, and beyond.

The oral history of performance art shows that the work of aesthetic origination was often done in relative isolation. Yet each artist also drew from the *Zeitgeist* of personal empowerment and do-it-yourself creative entitlement, which was often tied to subcultural and countercultural developments, including activist, agitprop and countercultural activities in the 1960s; feminist and punk aesthetics

in the 1970s; queer and AIDS activism, New Wave vaudeville and midnight aesthetics in the 1980s, and other techniques for countering the vehement commercialism of the decade; and industrial, post-AIDS, queer and cyberpunk cultures in the 1990s. *The Art of Living* desublimates and revives such extra-artistic influences, and the inter-medial innovations they prompted, including the appropriation of club performance, music hall, cabaret, stand-up, improvisation, collaboration, music, drums, dressing up, drag, tattooing, surgery, body-hacking, sadomasochism, fetish, drugs, crime, theatre and other surprising technologies for reorganising the social fabric of art. This reorganisation persists as a secret history, or barely repressed ideal, for the development of performance in the 1970s, and intensifies in subsequent decades, reaching a fever pitch in the 1990s.

Scope and structure

It would be a platitude to say that the artists I interviewed *matter* – to history, to culture, to me – and that each is important in their own right (*pace* Nietzsche: ‘And then some mischievous little bird flew past him and twittered: “What do you matter? What do you matter?”’⁸) In part, each artist matters in her or his *anomaly*. The anomaly is an exception to every rule. It is singular. Each is its own best (and only) example. While comparisons and tentative groupings can be made, a gathering of anomalies constitutes no authoritative series. A history of anomalies is necessarily a discontinuous, selective and even arbitrary series. Such a claim, of course, gives rise to problems at the level of defining scope, and rationalising one’s criteria for selection and (tacit?) exclusion.

I interviewed artists who are established in their seniority in terms of both influence and age. In terms of the latter, I interviewed artists around the age of 50 or over. In terms of the former, each artist is an *éminence grise* of performance art, a subcultural icon representing one in a series of cultural outposts. Their authority is conflicted. Each demands respect and adulation from peers, cultural inheritors and audiences, yet is wilfully (and sometimes stubbornly) *confirmed in their marginality*. Their marginality is partly self-avowed, but also conditioned by tacit or explicit refusals to adapt or adjust to curatorial trends, the art market, commercialism and other cultural vogues, which they abandon, question or torture, in fidelity to their own values and experiences.

The breadth of artists included here is necessarily partial, or incomplete: I have abandoned comprehensiveness for *depth*. A specific limitation is the fact that, with the notable exception of Ulay, the majority of the artists I interviewed live and work in the UK or the USA. Despite this parochialism on my part, the interviews with Anne Bean, Ulay, the Kipper Kids, Julia Bardsley, Ron Athey, Adrian Howells and others range across Europe more broadly, as many of the artists regularly present work in other countries to their place of residence, by nature of the material conditions of festivals, commissioning and touring. Nevertheless, the main focus of the publication is on Anglo-American performance art contexts, partly due to my own research specialisms, and limited by travel and resources. Regardless, this has the unfortunate effect of undermining the importance of historical and emergent genealogies of performance art in other major international locales, for example in Eastern Europe, Central and South America, Africa and East Asia (especially China).

Despite my task of selecting artists who are in some ways exemplary for a (Anglo-American) history of performance art, many of the same artists would balk at my implicit conferral of iconicity, influence and historical priority, which their suggested exemplarity might imply. Anne Bean refers to all art history as ‘custodianship’, for example, and Ulay lays bare the project of historical recovery, even if sympathetic, as a project in ‘intellectual capture’. Both remarks are acute, and describe the sense of containment or predation that may accompany the attention of scholars of art and performance, however well-intentioned or sensitive such attention (including my own) may wish itself to be.

In terms of the structure of *The Art of Living*, I have ordered the interviews in a more or less chronological fashion, according to the decade or period of each artist’s emergence. This is, of course, a tentative chronology, as many of the artists have undertaken serial emergences, hiatuses and resurgences. Reading through the interviews in the order they are presented, here, will give an impression, however, of a series of historical contexts, twists and turns, revelations, responses to perceived dead ends, and so on. They can also usefully be read at random, piecemeal, or in reverse order. The book concludes with information on additional resources, for interested readers to continue the labour of critical discovery each interview might hope to initiate or foster.

On method: oral history and qualitative research interviewing

Why interview artists? Why value their voice and speech? Mike Kelley argued the need for artist-critics, encouraging other artists to take up the labour of productive critical discourse about art – their own, and that of their friends and peers. Such a doubling or crossing of intellectual activities, between the practical and the theoretical, begins to corrode what he terms the ‘outmoded’ but still-dominant ‘division of labor between those who make art and those who interpret it for the masses’.⁹ A prolific artist, writer and interviewer, Kelley demanded that artists disturb the stratification of power between, on the one hand, the critic, theorist or historian, who retains the privilege to record one’s interpretations of art, and on the other, the producer of art who tends to labour in silence. Seeking information about art *from the horse’s mouth* – inducing the artist to speak, and recording (and to some extent reordering) their speech – helps to upset this one-sidedness in the distribution of the right to describe, account for, or historicise art.

Since its invention in the mid-nineteenth century, the interview has become a staple research method for journalists, as well as for novelists, filmmakers, playwrights and other creative practitioners. In the arts and humanities, scholars use the interview as a research method to differing extents, and with varying levels of methodological reflexivity. It is a crucial tactic for questioning the tendency towards critical distance that intervenes between the historian and her topic of study, as oral history reminds the historian that one’s ‘sources’ are responsive, empathetic and resourceful – and frequently able to *talk back* to one’s interpretations.

In tone, method and scope, *The Art of Living* is indebted particularly to four existing oral histories of performance in book form: Nick Kaye’s *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents* (1996); Maria Delgado and Paul Heritage’s *In Contact with the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre* (1996); Linda Montano’s *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (2001); and the most recent publication, the first volume of Heike Roms’s *What’s Welsh for Performance: An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales* (2008).¹⁰ Moreover, additional context is provided by a number of oral history projects online, including the *Archives of American Art Oral Histories Interviews* project, which includes but is not limited to interviews with performance artists; and the University of Girona’s encyclopedic *European Live Art Archive*, for which interviews with over sixty artists have been conducted on video.¹¹

Interestingly, the authors or conveners of these and other collections rarely reflect in depth on interviewing as a research method, or on the processes of preparation, transcription and editing of interview materials.¹² Exceptionally, Marquard Smith's *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers* is prefaced by a scholarly engagement with the interview's viability as a qualitative research method well suited to the discipline of visual studies. For Smith, the interview is able uniquely to respond to visual studies, as '*a living methodology*' and a sensibility, or '*intellectual attitude*'.¹³ Interviews may be singularly sympathetic to the 'new political situations, ethical dilemmas, historical documents, conceptual turns, and the new objects, artefacts, media, and environments' that constitute the empirical ground of contemporary critical thought.¹⁴ Historian Paul Thompson notes this resistant quality when he describes oral history as 'a breaking of the boundary between the educational institution and the world'.¹⁵

The production and collection of research interviews in *The Art of Living* is conditioned and enabled by two methodologies: *oral history*, as a socially engaged historical method that seeks to introduce new evidence from below (or alongside) official histories; and interviewing as a *qualitative* (as opposed to quantitative) research method in the social sciences. The former provides the present project with a *politics*, and the latter, its *method*. At times, moreover, the individual chapters might undergo slippages into the artist's interview (a distinct genre of conversational text, which nevertheless constitutes a kind of research-based interview).

In the 1960s and 1970s, oral history developed as a recognised model for collecting new historical evidence. In the 1980s, Paul Thompson argued that oral history might seek to displace the authoritative and oppressive historical records garnered from 'the chronicle of kings' and other signifiers of influence and bias, towards a *history from below*; his method of collecting evidence in the form of oral testimony invited fellow historians to divert their attention towards *lumpen* or otherwise voiceless constituents – women, children, indigenous peoples, prisoners, the insane, labourers, artisans, and so on – towards 'a history of a local industry or craft, social relationships in a particular community, culture and dialect, change in the family, the impact of wars and strikes', and other minor and subaltern histories.¹⁶ Thompson's arguments also extend to *elite* and professional respondents (as opposed to *everyman/woman* respondents), and may still sustain the same anti-authoritarian principles. Through oral history, as a *grassroots* or otherwise resistant practice,

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