When Brecht wrote the above in 1936, he was championing a “new” kind of theatre that was realistic, sensual, critical, and above all didactic. Without the apoliticism and detached irony of a Duchamp, he wished to put theatre “once again at the service of the mind.” Like Duchamp, Brecht abhorred the natural—the status quo; unlike Duchamp, who was by calling an iconoclast, Brecht was primarily interested in providing his audience with critical works that dealt with the problems of the past as these had evolved into the present—brought to the people as criticism, for criticism. The abnegation implicit in a Duchamp statement such as “there is no answer because there is no problem” would, for the German playwright, have been tantamount to travesty—perhaps even a curious kind of Pontius Pilate self-absolution. For Brecht, problems once recognized, demand answers, and answers invariably necessitate change.

But what does all of this have to do with performance?

I have written elsewhere that “performance” in its general sense is as “endemic to post-modern art as it is to a post-modern culture.” (Parachute, Dec., 1979). However, “performance art” as it appears in magazines like this one is a “specialized” mode of art production and demands special attention, though its importance or value as a social phenomenon may only be determined by referring to socio-cultural problems.

My aim here is to offer a socially relevant criticism that might promote a socially engaged “performance” either with or without the art. It seems to me that most recent art performances still adhere to an aesthetic, or more precisely an ideology, that has been characterized as l’art pour l’art since the late nineteenth century. As such, they reveal certain tendencies in artists’ productions and their social relationships. I want to focus on one of these tendencies, which I have characterized as “imaging,” for it seems that the emphasis given to Image and Format, or if we are looking for more appropriate synonyms, “style” and “package,” has led to a curious kind of disengagement from real social and cultural issues. Furthermore, seventies performance has surfaced to a kind of historical impasse, one that could be loosely categorized as an era without a vector—post-modernism. The time is now ripe for an investigation of strategies which might create performances that are engaged in the broadest sense of the term, that is, both pleasurable and instructive.
In 1967 the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote "the sense of an ending ... is... endemic to what we call modernism." Now, it seems, that ending has arrived and we have entered the "post-modern" era—an era that does not at this stage really know what it is "post" to, yet which comfortably accepts the provisional title until something better comes along. "Post" denotes the past and apparently "cleansing" or "denial" is enough. Accepting this description, we can become thoroughly modern since for the post-modern individual, fear of the future is passe, a legacy of Existentialism and the "modernist" angst that accompanied it. Without fear—with a laissez-faire degree of optimism—we are free to live in the present.

The idea that we have no future is implicit in the term post-modern. Now our future is contained in the past; since our future is contained in the past it seems acceptable to live onanistically in the present, or, as a recent etiologist of our contemporary narcissism has it,

It makes sense to live only for the moment, to fix our eyes on our own "private performance," to become connoisseurs of our own decadence, to cultivate a "transcendental self-attention" (James Hougan)

Self-attention, then, may lead to a new form of ultimate self-knowledge but before it can be recognized as such and tested for its legitimacy, qua self-knowledge, it must be externalized in some form for the other—an audience. One of the forms this externalization may take is "Image" and when reproduced it assumes the status of a commodity, thereby becoming subject to the internal pressures and temperature of the marketplace. Image and format are products of the "reductivist" urge. And the urge to reduce, to find the lowest common denominators, to not multiply entities beyond what is absolutely necessary, to search for fundamentals and essences—all are identifiers of the modernist ideology. In the practice of the separate disciplines of music, visual art, and literature, these "analytical" imperatives lead to a theoretical and practical impasse. In the late sixties the exhaustion or death of art—art degree zero—seemed imminent in these terms. In a sense abstractions were what we had produced, abstractions were what we became. This was modernism. And in this alienated, abstracted state we searched for wholeness. Beyond the looking glass of modernism, we reduced ourselves to roleless beings needing to assume a multiplicity of roles. It was not even acceptable to call oneself a painter or sculptor anymore. Artists were writers and musicians and filmmakers and "did" installations.

Now that the millenium is approaching, the new post-modern version of the "whole" man and the "whole" woman is beginning to emerge—the whole being the sum and not the synthesis of the many parts. In becoming, or more precisely in wishing to become whole, we have become further divorced from ourselves. Paradoxically, in this quest for integration, we have become "abstractions." And what are abstractions but images—mere appearances of reality.

In post-modern performance, Imaging and its concomitant ghosting become dominant modes of behavior. Imaging, the result of excessive self-attention, is a shifting from one role and its projected, reflected image to another, without one of them becoming dominant. One example is Joan Jonas's "Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy"(1975).

At first I saw the monitor/projector as an ongoing mirror... watching myself. I tried to alter the image using objects, costumes and masks, moving through various identities (the sorcerer, the floozie, the howling dog). Narcissism was a habit. Every move was for the monitor.

Ghosting is somewhat akin to "ghost writing"; it's an ability to realize one's performance without assistance of props. It can lead to a particular kind of narcissistic self-scrutiny for the sake of authenticating experience and existence. Moreover, it requires the filling of the stopgap of inadequacy; like the employment of the ghost writer for the semi-literate "writer," ghosting provides the bridge between what is known or experienced and the means of communicating it. It's a means toward self-awareness and simultaneously a means to legitimize this "awareness of self" to an audience. Ironically, the "self" needs the "other" before any such knowledge can be obtained. The extent or success of self-knowledge can finally depend on individual self-consciousness of the "seeker" after self, as revealed in Andy Warhol's The Philosophy of Andy Warhol.

Day after day I look in the mirror and I still see something—a new pimple...
dunk a Johnson and Johnson cotton ball into Johnson and Johnson rubbing alcohol and rub the cotton ball against the pimple... And while the alcohol is drying I think about nothing. How it's always in style. Always in good taste... When the alcohol is dry, I'm ready to apply the flesh-colored acne-pimple medication... So now the pimple's covered. But am I covered? I have to look in the mirror for some more clues. Nothing is missing. It's all there. The affectless gaze... The bored languor, the wasted pallor... the graying lips. The shaggy silver-white hair, soft and metallic... nothing is missing. I'm everything my scrapbook says I am.

Warhol's mirror image becomes a ghost, his scrap book (history) authenticates his present and without this other “Warhol,” Warhol might cease to exist.

Self/other relationships are also particularly evident in the early performance work of Vito Acconci. Using writings of Erving Goffman and particularly his notion of “bureaucratization of spirit” (the homogenization of performance in the theatre of everyday life), Acconci sets out to test the assumptions underlying the basic “I”/“you” opposition. The performer is always in the act of self-aggrandizing or self-effacing: in control, or potentially out of control. For Acconci, turning the “I” into an “it” is as much a characteristic of performance as the presentation of self to other(s).

This can be defined as “performance” in the sense of “something accomplished” (the accomplishing of a self, an image, an object). (Acconci)

For a “self” to be accomplished as a self, it must be reified (“thingified”) and self-knowledge once again post-dates imaging. Self-aggrandizement (the self writ large) and self-effacement (the self writ small) become other indices of reification. Implicit in this form of investigation is a form of critical analysis. However, as a form of analysis it tends, as a result of the emphasis placed on the opposition, to conceal more than it reveals.

On the one hand, the system is “open”: if I turn on myself (applying stress to myself), I make myself available to (grabable by) a viewer. On the other hand, the system is “closed”: if I both start and end the (same) action, I'm circling myself up in myself, I've turned myself into a self-enclosed object: the viewer is left outside, the viewer is put in the position of a voyeur.

The one attempts to understand and criticize the other (role or image), but its criticism is usually a pale reflection of active criticism and becomes parody. As a toothless form of criticism, a criticism that is without base, belief system, or ideology, it reproduces rather than reveals. It reinforces opposition or the maintenance of the status quo rather than lends itself to change. Parody in this form is closely associated with a curious form of contemporary cynicism that Christopher Lasch has recently written about.

As more and more people find themselves working at jobs beneath their abilities, as leisure and sociability themselves take on the qualities of work, the posture of cynical detachment becomes the dominant mode of everyday intercourse. Many forms of popular art appeal to this sense of knowingness and thereby reinforce it. They parody familiar roles and themes, inviting the audience to consider itself superior to its surroundings. Popular forms begin to parody themselves: westerns take off on westerns; Soap operas like Fernwood, Soaps and Mary...
Hartman, Mary Hartman assure the viewer of his own sophistication by mocking the conventions of soap opera.

Some form of "high" art do the same thing, its practitioners showing the same kind of cynical detachment afflictng writers and producers of Soap or Mary Hartman. High art begins to parody high art.

So-called New Image painting uses some of the conventions of formalist painting from the sixties, throws in an expressionist or neo-primitive image, and mocks not only sixties painting (the unwholesome canonization of essentialism) but also low (folk) art (naive and wholesome primitivism). The New Image work then becomes an oxymoronic form of "cultured naivete." The result is kitsch. Bad painting becomes good post-modern painting because it assures its viewers that they are sophisticated. They see through it and thus come to recognize its true value as a form of criticism—parody.

The popular cultural form of the beauty pageant is mocked by General Idea and in typical Duchampian dedoublement fashion, they too assure their "sophisticated" audience that they are witnessing (or taking part in) a ceremonial mocking of the beauty pageant form and conceptual or performance art as well as the whole status of art in general. Aping the Hollywood star system or Las Vegas night club acts is simply that—aping. Stylish and sophisticated it may be, but criticism it is not.

Parody may not be enough, especially if we ever find out what our post-modern priorities should be. Parody in the seventies was pleasurable but it could have been more instructive. We don't necessarily have to go back to school, pass exams, work for diplomas to transform Mondo Cane into Mondo Arte. Acknowledging Imaging as a product of seventies cultural narcissism may enable us to defeat it in the eighties.

Bibliography


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